

The Epistemic Value of Civil Disagreement

Abstract: In this essay, I argue that the practice of civil disagreement has robust epistemic benefits and that these benefits enable meaningful forms of reconciliation—across worldview lines and amid the challenging information environment of our age. I then engage two broad groups of objections: either that civil disagreement opposes, rather than promotes, clarity, or else that it does little to help it. If successful, my account gives us reason to include civil disagreement among what Mill calls “the real morality of public discussion,” a fact that should stir us to take more seriously the decline of civility in contemporary life.

Keywords: anger; civility; civil disagreement; clarity; J.S. Mill; pluralistic society; reconciliation

1. Introduction

A glance at today’s public square reveals two things: that we disagree about a whole host of important issues, and that those disagreements are growing increasingly bitter (Pew Research Center, 2017; Haidt, 2017).¹ The first of these observations should come as no surprise. Ours is a pluralistic society, which, by its very definition, means that we live and work alongside people who view the world in fundamentally different ways. When we disagree on such pivotal issues as the existence and character of God, the extent of human autonomy, or whether we have a fixed and knowable nature, is it any wonder that our views on ethics and politics, etc., differ as they do? When joined together, these two facts—the extent of our disagreements and their increasing bitterness—raise important questions. Does the *manner* of our disagreements matter, or is it enough that we aim at truth? Ought we to disagree *civilly*, or is civility an empty (even repressive) artifact of a former age? If civility matters, then how and to what extent? Is it mere “icing on the cake” of an ordered society, or is it a crucial ingredient of that cake?

In this essay, I shall argue that the practice of civil disagreement matters—and matters profoundly—for a healthy society, especially for pluralistic ones like ours. My account will focus

¹ The Pew study tracks not only the increase in polarization but also antipathy.

Though commentators note that worries about incivility are not a new problem (see, e.g., Bejan 2017: 1-2), some nevertheless acknowledge an increased *perception* “that there is such a crisis [of civility]” or that ours is “an age of unusual anger and discord.” See, respectively: Bejan 2017: 3 (my emphasis); Bybee 2016: 2.

specifically on the *epistemic* benefits of civil disagreement (or civility, which I use here synonymously) and the ways that these benefits can promote much-needed reconciliation in our time. In short, civil disagreement is a virtuous practice, both intellectually and politically; it promotes clarity and, through it, reconciliation, across worldview lines and amid the challenging information environment of our age.² If I am correct in this, then we have much to fear from the growing neglect, if not outright rejection, of civility and much work to do in correcting this trend.

Critics dispute this claim about the epistemic benefits of civility. Such people fall in at least two camps. The first asserts that civil disagreement actually hinders clarity, rather than promotes it. The reasons for this hindrance vary. Some contend that civility norms restrict valuable ways of scrutinizing or disputing with our opponents, or that too much concern over incivility distracts us from confronting the more pressing justice issues of our day. As Randall Kennedy puts it, “The civility movement is deeply at odds with what an invigorated liberalism requires: intellectual clarity [and] an insistence upon grappling with the substance of controversies” (Kennedy 2001). Others claim that civility hinders clarity (and therefore justice) by preventing the disempowered from gaining a hearing for their concerns. The rules of civil disagreement keep such people from speaking and acting in ways that will actually get the attention of the powerful and force the latter into dialogue (Lozano-Reich and Cloud 2009).³ Still others claim, or at least suggest by their actions, that certain forms of moral ignorance can only be shattered by the “shock” of incivility; what some people need is the equivalent of cold water to the face, something civil disagreement

² Not only is civil disagreement a *political* virtue, but it belongs among that list of practices William Galston terms “liberal virtues,” i.e., practices instrumental to “the preservation of liberal societies and institutions.” (Galston 1991: 200.) A defining feature of liberal societies is their pluralism—what Galston calls “diversity”—and the present essay stresses the benefits of civility in such contexts. My account of civility bears some resemblance to Galston’s discussion of “public discourse” (pp. 226-227), while going in new directions and much more detail than his.

³ This view also finds sympathetic treatment, though not always agreement, in Waisanen 2014: 309; Boyd 2006: 873-874 ; and Mount 1973: 38.

can't provide (Olberding 2019; Ryszard 2019).⁴ Whether these criticisms ring true depends, of course, on what we mean by civil disagreement. I shall define my term in the next section.

The second camp of critics takes a more modest position. These claim not that civility hinders clarity but only that it does little (or nothing) to help it. Mill epitomizes this view in *On Liberty*. Speaking of what he calls “temperate discourse,” which I read as synonymous with civil discourse, Mill declines to include it among those practices constituting “the real morality of public discussion.”⁵ As he puts it,

Undoubtedly the manner of asserting an opinion, even though it be a true one, may be very objectionable, and may justly incur severe censure. But the *principal offenses* of the kind are such as it is mostly impossible, unless by accidental self-betrayal, to bring home to conviction. The gravest of them is, to argue sophistically, to suppress facts or arguments, to misstate the elements of the case, or misrepresent the opposite opinion. (Mill 2011: 1036, my emphasis)

This passage and others like it suggest that Mill's criterion for determining what counts among the real morality of public discussion has to do with each practice's epistemic import—that is, with the degree to which a given practice aids the search for truth, or its absence hinders it. Mill's decision not to include civil or temperate discourse among this prized list implies his low view of its epistemic power. I aim to challenge that perception and to do so in ways that draw upon some of Mill's own insights.

These, then, are my goals in this paper: to stipulate what I mean by civil disagreement, to include classifying it as an Aristotelian “mean”; to show how it is that civility's practice promotes the goods of clarity and, through it, reconciliation; to sketch some of the challenges confronting us in the area of clarity today, which make civil disagreement all the more urgent; and to defend the value of said practice against objections, including but not limited to those listed above.

⁴ Neither of these authors actually endorses this view, though Olberding seems sympathetic with it.

⁵ Mill defines intemperate discourse as things like “invective, sarcasm, personality [i.e., disparagement], and the like” (2011: 1036).

Before beginning, though, I should note that others have also argued for the epistemic value of civility. In the accounts with which I'm familiar, what is being directly clarified is the *worth of some person*—i.e., that of the sender and/or the recipient of civility (Bybee 2016: 32-38; Calhoun 2000: 259, respectively). In other words, when we treat others civilly, we communicate either that we ourselves deserve such treatment or that those whom we treat civilly do. Though I don't dispute such claims, I offer a different, albeit complementary, account. My concern lies with the clarity that civil disagreement lends directly to our *views* (both "what" we believe and "why") as well as to "what is in fact the case" about some matter of dispute. It is through improved clarity about these things—through insight into speakers' *ideas* and not merely their displays of good will—that it becomes possible for us to reconcile with our neighbors in a range of morally-significant ways.⁶ Thus, although the process described in this essay culminates in "reconciliation," which is not itself an epistemic benefit, I have titled the paper as I have because of the pivotal role *clarity* plays in the account.

2. Civility Defined

When one speaks of civility, one must take into account that the word means various things to various people (Calhoun 2000: 255-259). (This fact alone may do much to explain the many disputes surrounding civility's value, both epistemic and otherwise.) I use the word "civil" here to denote a quality, or virtue, of *disagreement*. The idea that we would "agree civilly" seems to me to make little sense; it is when we are most tempted to defame or attack one another—as when disputing our deepest differences—that talk of civility has substance. Indeed, as one sociologist puts it, civility is "the art of living with our deepest differences," which means especially our

⁶ I don't mean to suggest by this that the "mere" communication of good will cannot encourage reconciliation on its own. I think it can. Nevertheless, the kinds of reconciliation that concern me here have a different source.

political, moral and religious differences (Guinness 2008: 163).⁷ Though I wish to tighten that definition, it establishes an initial framework.

I have referred to civil disagreement as a “virtuous” practice because of its resonance with an aspect of Aristotelian virtue theory—namely, the golden mean. To possess a virtue, according to Aristotle, is to have a disposition to choose the “mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1107a3). Although my paper focuses on concrete actions or practices, rather than dispositions, I believe we get the clearest sense of what civil disagreement is when we distinguish it from two related (and vicious) practices, between which civility sits as a golden mean. Starting our examination with these alternative practices in view gives us a better sense of what makes civility excellent.

I am using the word civility to describe a golden mean of *disagreement*, specifically. Thus, a prior discussion of disagreement in general will lend precision to my later account of *why* civil disagreement is excellent, its counterfeits vicious. I therefore make the following assumption: When we disagree over important matters affecting the common good, we ought to do so for the sake of resolving the dispute in question. Disagreement serves this purpose; it has a telos. “Resolution” consists firstly in *achieving clarity* about the disputed matter but also, where possible, in *reconciling* with our opponent. This twofold aim aligns with what Aristotle identifies as our rational and political nature. As rational animals, we should want to be in the truth ourselves; as political ones, to be there *with* our neighbors. Any high-stakes disagreement that doesn’t aim at clarity and reconciliation misses the mark.

Though this might appear to be a large claim, we seem to take something like this teleology for granted when we use terms like “profitable disagreement.” In their classic guide *How to Read*

⁷ Likewise, John Courtney Murray calls a civil society one “formed by men locked together in argument,” which presupposes disagreement (2005: 24).

A Book, e.g., Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren devote a chapter to “Criticizing a Book Fairly,” in which they state that “The profit in good conversation is something learned.” They have in mind here “conversations between persons who confront each other,” i.e. disagreements. They also warn against “the futility of mere contentiousness”—of disagreeing without a concern for truth—while cautioning against “disagreeing *hopelessly*,” as if both parties couldn’t in principle reconcile (1972: 137-151). These ordinary observations affirm both prongs of the above telos.

Some might object that this conception of disagreement is too narrow. Michael Walzer, e.g., has detailed the broad scope of activities involved in politics, some of which, like “demonstration” and “debate” may employ disagreement for reasons *other than* the careful consideration of the truth (1999: 60-62). To take the first of these, demonstration “deliver[s] a message.” It communicates “personal intensity, numerical strength, and doctrinal conviction—all of which are critical to popular power.” Thus, someone who disagrees with their neighbors as part of a demonstration may have other aims in view than the careful consideration of what is true. Such disagreement may be a show of force or an attempt to rally one’s side.

Still, it seems right to say that such people should *ultimately* have a concern for truth. To throw oneself headlong into demonstrating or debating for some cause without any concern for the truth of that cause seems wrong, just as the traditional criticism of the Sophists for being unconcerned with truth has seemed justified to most people. And for good reason, for part of what it means to be an intellectually virtuous person is to desire—indeed, to *love*—the truth; and, as rational beings, we should want to be intellectually virtuous.⁸ Much of great consequence depends on it. Thus, although disagreement may serve multiple ends, it must not abandon concern for truth.⁹

⁸ For more on the importance of loving truth for intellectual virtue, see Byerly 2017: 154-158.

⁹ Alessandra Tanessini likewise notes the teleological aims of disagreement, which she treats in the narrower sense of “debate.” As Tanesini puts it, “debate is part of enquiry whose purpose is the production and distribution of

With these assumptions about the normative goals of disagreement in mind, we can now get a clearer sense of what makes its vices “vices,” while civility a virtue. Here, then, is what I *don’t* mean by civility or civil disagreement. On the one hand, I don’t mean “mere niceness or politeness” in the context of some dispute. Some people, driven perhaps by a due regard for the feelings or worth of their interlocutor, refrain from openly challenging this person’s ideas, with the result that a crucial step in the process of truth-seeking never occurs: the contest of ideas, or, what Mill calls, “an active controversy with opponents” (2011: 1032).¹⁰ Thus, to draw upon the previous discussion about disagreement, such people sacrifice the first goal, that of achieving clarity, in favor of the second goal, the hope of reconciliation. Sometimes we do this to keep the peace among family or friends; at others, to make an outsider feel included; at still others, to save our own skin. Now there may be times when that choice is the right one. Yet, there are others when we *ought* to disagree openly, as when defending the vulnerable against aspersion or challenging a dangerous error. It’s at such times that “mere niceness” becomes a vice. Genuine civility leaves ample room for robust dispute, albeit not without boundaries.¹¹ Indeed, the very idea that (mere) disagreement constitutes disrespect is mistaken. For, as Trudy Govier argues, “To present someone with an argument is to attend to his or her mind and thinking processes and to do so in a non-manipulative way. It is...to show respect for [arguers] as autonomous, thoughtful people” (Hundleby 2013: 241).¹²

knowledge and responsibly held belief.” Its norms therefore “facilitate the achievement of the proper aims of this practice” (Tanesini 2018: 222).

¹⁰ One prominent account of “politeness” norms stresses the subject’s need to prioritize the opinions and feelings of her interlocutor, while downplaying her own. Such behavior may frustrate one’s attempts at argumentative rigor—or even clarity. See Hoppman 2017: 235-240.

¹¹ Guinness likens civility norms to the “Queensbury Rules” imposed on boxing, which placed matches “inside a ring, within rules, and under a referee” (2008: 151-152).

¹² Note that Hundleby *rejects* Govier’s call to minimize “adversariality” in argumentation.

On the other hand, some people are so *unconcerned* about the feelings or worth of their interlocutor that they freely trample over this person in their zeal to reach the truth. Call this “ruthless disagreement.” Though admirable in its desire for truth, this approach compromises that second (albeit merely hopeful) goal of disagreement: reconciliation with one’s opponent. For, by its very manner, ruthless disagreement creates further obstacles to that reconciliation. It does so not because of its intellectual rigor—indeed, the very act of “trampling” might detract from intellectual rigor—but because of its disrespectful manner and the resentment this promotes. Those who disagree with their neighbors as if the latter were garbage shouldn’t be surprised at their neighbors’ reluctance to reconcile.

Yet, a still more troubling feature of ruthless disagreement remains. In its zeal for arriving at truth, ruthless disagreement undermines its very goal. A full account of how it does so will have to wait.¹³ However, the crux is this: The kind of clarity we need often requires dialoguing with others, yet ruthless disagreement sabotages that dialogue. It does so because of its tendency either to *terminate* said dialogue or else to compromise the *fairmindedness* of one or both parties.¹⁴ Clarity suffers in either case.

This brings us to civility. In contrast to “mere niceness,” on the one hand, and “ruthless disagreement,” on the other, civil disagreement is that difficult balance point, or “mean,” between these extremes—*difficult* because we find ourselves easily drawn either to minimize our disputes, or else to vent our feelings on those who think differently than we do.¹⁵ Unlike those who embrace

¹³ See sections 3.1 and 5.1 for a defense of these points, in particular the discussion of anger.

¹⁴ As Hoppmann notes, “an evident lack of politeness might be harmful for the aim of cooperatively spirited critical discussion.” The interlocutor who aims solely at resolving the dispute in question must nevertheless attend to basic features of human psychology in the process (2017: 241).

¹⁵ I don’t wish to deny that this is indeed a *difficult* balance point, hence what makes its achievement excellent. For a paper that explores potential conflicts between politeness norms, on the one hand, and dialectical norms, on the other, see Hoppmann 2017: 235-240. The conflict diminishes, however, if you grant that respect for the worth of others doesn’t require perfect obedience to politeness norms.

mere niceness, civil people maintain a steady pursuit of truth; they do so, however, in a manner that encourages reconciliation. Section 3 provides a full account of how this works, yet it all turns on civility's distinctive feature: respect for the intrinsic worth of others. As Sarah Buss has put it, "To treat someone 'with respect' is to treat her in a way that acknowledges her intrinsic value, or 'dignity.'" It is "a value tied to what she is, not to what she has done" (1999: 796-797).¹⁶ Civility, then, is disagreement shaped by the worth of the other. Or, to put it formally, *we show civility toward others when we dispute their ideas in ways that respect those persons' intrinsic worth.*

Obvious candidates for such behavior include things like name calling, jeering, personal attacks, or refusing to let one speak (through constant interruptions or shouting down one's interlocutor, etc.). It is not my goal to itemize all the forms incivility might take—in part, because I think the list will vary somewhat for different societies, and also because it must be sensitive to the intentions and contrasting worldview commitments of individuals *within* the same society.¹⁷ Recall our pluralism, once again. Yet though we may not agree on how to classify *each and every* particular, there is enough overlap for us to begin the act of civil disagreement.

Some may object at this point. *Who says* that people have worth apart from, or in spite of, the views they hold? Doesn't this smuggle deontological assumptions about human value into a concept that is supposed to have broad public appeal? One shortcoming of Cheshire Calhoun's widely-cited essay on civility, on my view, is the way she speaks of people's value in contingent terms. As Calhoun says, "civility is a virtue that we are required to exercise toward others only if they pursue *socially* acceptable views and behavior," a claim suggesting that our worth as persons

¹⁶ Channeling Thomas Hobbes, Richard Boyd notes "We have an obligation to be civil to others out of a deference to the respect in which we are no better than they" (2006: 873).

¹⁷ This puts me at odds, somewhat, with Calhoun (2000). On her view, civility requires a "common language" or consensus about which behaviors communicate respect; consequently, this leaves no room for weighing the sender's *intentions*, when determining what counts as civil. I address this challenge in Section 5.2.

That section also holds value in response to Hundleby and other feminist scholars, who worry that what societies *count* as respectful discourse differs across gender lines, giving men the upper hand (2013: 242-247).

hinges on our holding the right views (2000: 272). Now, it would take us far afield to argue for intrinsic human worth in this essay. I define civility as I do both because I believe in this conception of worth but also because it aptly describes what civility looks like in practice, perhaps most notably from the standpoint of someone on the receiving end. A recipient of genuine civility might, upon reflection, find herself saying, “My opponent treated me as a person of value, even while he disputed my views.” Yet, for those who continue to protest, one could just as easily say that civility involves disputing others’ ideas *as if* those with whom we disagree *had* intrinsic worth. Call this the “hypothetical approach,” the former the “objective approach.” Viewed from the outside, the hypothetical and objective approaches to disagreement may look identical; though, from the inside, the agents will be acting from different motives. Those who practice the hypothetical approach to disagreement will do so for the sake of the extrinsic goods it promotes. Those who take the objective approach will also desire those goods, with one addition: such people will seek to honor the worth of their interlocutor for its own sake.

This, then, is what I mean by civility. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen *how*, specifically, the practice of civil disagreement promotes clarity and reconciliation, or even what I mean by the latter concepts.

3. How Civility Promotes Clarity and Reconciliation

In this section, I will unpack the following syllogism:

- 1) If we want to increase our chances of achieving clarity and reconciliation today, we need to practice civil disagreement.
- 2) We want to increase those chances.
- 3) Therefore, we need to practice civil disagreement.

By the words “increase our chances” I mean to indicate that civility *alone* does not guarantee clarity or reconciliation. Those who desire clarity, e.g., will also need to practice other things, like intellectual carefulness, sound reasoning, and courage. I hesitate even to call civility a “necessary condition,” since one can find people who achieve clarity and reconciliation in the face of tremendous incivility. Nevertheless, such people are exceptions—moral and intellectual exemplars—whereas I am concerned with what will help *most people* achieve the goods in question. Say, therefore, that civility is all-but-indispensable for clarity and reconciliation.

By “we” and “today” I have in mind members of contemporary pluralistic societies—places marked by worldview disagreement, polarization, and a heavy reliance on modern communications technologies. More on this last point in Section 4. I shall focus my defense below on the first premise. Along the way, it should become plain why clarity and reconciliation are so desirable, which is the substance of my second premise.

3.1 Dialogue

So then, what is it about the practice of civil disagreement that helps us arrive at the goods in question? The answer begins with the relationship between civility and effective dialogue. By dialogue, I mean a conversation among two or more people (especially perceived opponents) that allows all sides to clearly and accurately present their views, to ask questions, to provide or receive feedback, and to clarify misconceptions. Thus defined, dialogue requires at least two things: that we actually *have* a conversation, and that we do so under a *fair and optimal state of mind*. Civility invites and sustains such dialogue, whereas incivility repels and undermines it.¹⁸

¹⁸ Theresa Bejan, e.g., refers to civility as “the set of habits of speaking and listening that *make passionate debate possible*, by allowing us to disagree, and to tolerate the inevitable contempt and disagreeableness involved in doing so” (2017: 164, my emphasis).

I take this last point to be a commonsense observation from everyday experience.¹⁹ Consider Jan and Jane, two people engaged in conversation around some weighty topic—the status of the human fetus, say, or the best way to respond to our migrant crisis. Both women have strong, and strongly opposing, views. Now, suppose that when Jan proceeds to voice her opinion, Jane responds by mocking her or rolling her eyes. Perhaps she calls her a bigot or shouts her down or threatens violence—or acts upon it. How is Jan likely to respond?

I suspect Jan will respond in one of two ways. If she has a low tolerance for such treatment, she will probably withdraw from the conversation, whether physically or mentally. As Alessandra Tanesini notes, certain forms of incivility encourage either intellectual timidity or servility in their recipients, both of which constitute a kind of withdrawal (2016: 87-88).²⁰ If, however, Jan does remain engaged, she is likely to grow defensive. She might cling to her view *simply because it is hers*, or reject Jane’s view simply because it is Jane’s, regardless of any merits it otherwise has. Or, just as likely, she might return the other’s incivilities, promoting a similar defensiveness in Jane.²¹

Such results are especially likely to occur if Jan grows *angry* in response to Jane’s manner. As Martha Nussbaum notes, drawing upon the work of Aristotle, anger emerges from one’s sense of having witnessed or experienced a *wrong*, and the insults, threats and other forms of incivility

¹⁹ Hence why we find scholars like Adler and Van Doren saying, “Ordinary conversations between persons who confront each other are good only when they are carried on civilly...What is important is that there is an *intellectual* etiquette to be observed. Without it, conversation is bickering rather than profitable conversation” (1972: 137-8, their emphasis). Elsewhere, they stress that such etiquette makes one “not only polite, but also *effective*, in talking back (p. 142, my emphasis). Or, as Don Waisanen, a communications scholar, puts it, “Civility keeps the conversation going” (2014: 299).

²⁰ Tanesini has in mind behaviors like “talking over other people, interrupting them, [and] putting them down in public”—all of which constitute, but don’t exhaust, forms of incivility. Tanesini treats them as expressions of “haughtiness,” i.e., “a form of arrogance which manifests itself through disdain for other people. (See pp. 73-74.) Such disdain stands directly opposed to civil disagreement as I’ve defined it, which involves a respect for others’ worth.

²¹ Similarly, Govier argues in *The Philosophy of Argument* that aggressive forms of argumentation “heighten the likelihood that opposing opinions will slip into aggressive modes that interfere with rational exchange”—that is, with “the proper operation of reason” itself. (As quoted in Hundleby 2013: 240.)

that increasingly fill today's public discourse certainly qualify. What distinguishes anger from the mere sense of having been wronged is the desire to "payback" the wrongdoer in some way (Nussbaum 2016). Now, to the extent that Jan becomes focused on paying Jane back, she *loses her focus* on, and fitness for, truth-seeking. Why? Because the latter requires fairmindedness. It requires a willingness to detach ourselves from our prior positions and feelings and to admit where we might be wrong, our opponent right. Yet all this lies at odds, or at least in tension, with the angry person's desire to be vindicated, her opponent punished.

In short, Jan has lost her fair and optimal state of mind; she has become epistemically compromised. Whether Jan withdraws from the conversation or grows defensive, both possibilities undermine effective dialogue. They do so in the first case because the conversation literally ceases, while in the second because the mindset of one or both parties no longer conduces to truth-seeking. It's in this respect that what I earlier termed "ruthless disagreement" proves vicious: It hinders clarity, not to mention reconciliation, the proper goals of disagreement.

Ironically, Mill himself notes the way incivility impedes clarity, though he limits his discussion to those cases where the people being uncivil hold minority viewpoints. "In general," he writes, "opinions contrary to those commonly received can only obtain a hearing by studied moderation of language, and the most cautious avoidance of unnecessary offense, from which they hardly ever deviate even in a slight degree without losing ground" (2011: 1037). Mill's statement seems to imply that humans are psychologically constituted such that we struggle to fairly evaluate someone's criticisms of our ideas unless they're packaged in a respectful manner.²² Incivility

²² Psychological research on the success of supervisor/subordinate feedback sessions supports this point (Steelman, Levy, and Snell 2004: 165-184). This research observed the importance of "delivery" for a successful feedback session (pp. 167-8). Subordinates who found their supervisor's approach to be "supportive," "considerate of [their] feelings," and "tactful"—things consistent with civil disagreement—better received the feedback (p. 181).

Though disagreement in the public square differs from employee feedback sessions in various respects, both encounters involve criticism of a *personal* nature (whether such criticism centers on a person's workplace performance, or else that person's views on public policy—views often rooted in one's cherished ethical and

(understood here as “ruthless disagreement”) corrodes productive dialogue. Yet if this is so, one wonders why Mill did not extend this principle to *both* parties in a debate. Had he done so, perhaps he would have given greater weight to the epistemic effects of civil disagreement.

In contrast to the above, when we disagree civilly—responding in a manner consistent with our opponent’s worth, regardless of how we view his or her ideas—we remove unnecessary barriers for that person to remain engaged and in a helpful frame of mind. To be sure, our opponents may still balk at disagreement simply as a matter of pride, regardless of how that disagreement is conveyed—as Socrates’ opponents famously did, when he exposed their ignorance (*Apology* 23c-d). Yet, at the very least, we won’t have made it *harder* for our opponents to view our criticisms fairly. In short, civil disagreement promotes effective dialogue, which in turn promotes our next good: clarity.

3.2 Clarity

By clarity I have in mind three things, each of which matters for our common life. Those who have clarity perceive:

- (C1) What others believe about some issue
- (C2) Why they believe or act as they do about this issue
- (C3) What is in fact the case about said issue

The matter in question might be a policy proposal, an ethical judgment, a scientific hypothesis, a legal verdict, or anything else that might divide us, especially in pluralistic societies. Though different in kind, (C1)-(C3) each matters in important ways. Were I to misunderstand *what* you believe on some idea of consequence, I risk slandering you or wasting precious time confronting

religious beliefs). It is not unreasonable, therefore, to think that the same sorts of factors that enable an *employee* to receive criticism well will do likewise for an *interlocutor* in a public debate.

a fiction. Yet, just as importantly, if I fail to grasp *why* you believe or act as you do, I may grossly misrepresent your reasonableness and/or character. Anyone who has in fact been misrepresented in this way—whether personally or in the public mind—knows how painful and unjust it can be, especially when others take corrective action against you because of the mistake.

Consider the following example. A few years ago, I was out walking my dog when I spotted a bumper sticker I will never forget. The sticker featured a bellicose-looking map of the United States, over which read the words “Stay the f*ck out. We’re full.” (The message was unedited.) Upon recovering from my shock, I inferred two things: first, that the sticker called for increased border control, and second, that it was motivated by animus. For, presumably, one would not speak in such a way unless moved by contempt. And then it struck me: those who read this bumper sticker may proceed to draw a third inference, namely, that *everyone* who favors increased border control—a broad concept—is similarly motivated. (Indeed, in the years since I encountered the sticker, this inference has gained great traction in public debate.) What gave my realization particular force is that I had just finished a 6-month assignment in Honduras for the U.S. military, where I was privy to various reasons why U.S. citizens might have concern about porous borders, *none of which had anything to do* with the color of someone’s skin, the language they spoke, etc. They were prudential reasons only, entirely consistent with a due regard for the worth and welfare of foreigners.²³ Indeed, one could easily hold these concerns about security while simultaneously treating one’s Hispanic neighbors with respect. Whatever one’s views on national borders, the point is this: we cannot form a just estimation of people’s beliefs (and likewise of their character and reasonableness) unless we know *why* they believe as they do.

²³ To prove the point, a co-worker of mine, himself a Honduran immigrant and naturalized citizen, once shared with me his own concern for the porous state of the U.S.’s borders. I had not solicited the information.

Finally, if our incivility prevents us from dialoguing effectively and, thus, from sharpening our ideas and testing our arguments against each other, then we risk misunderstanding *what is in fact the case* about the issue at hand (i.e., (C3)). For, as Mill himself notes, we must engage the views of others if we hope to arrive at truth—and not just in the sciences, but especially in the “infinitely more complicated” matters of “morals, religion, politics, social relations, and the business of life” (2011: 1028). It is here, Mill says, that “three fourths of the arguments for every disputed opinion consist in dispelling the appearances which favour some opinion different from it” (Ibid.: 1028). Should our manner of disagreement grow so disrespectful that we can no longer stomach any interaction with the other side, then our chances of arriving at truth will be much-reduced.

This, in turn, has implications for the overall *justness* of our societies. For, if our discussions concern matters of grave consequence, as they often do in public life; and if we arrive at false beliefs about these matters because of our incivility, as seems likely, given the foregoing; then we may commit ourselves to policies or life plans, based on these false beliefs, that are costly and destined to fail. This is bad enough when it occurs on a personal level, but when it occurs on a public level it can affect millions or even tens of millions of people. Clarity matters for justice’s sake.

When we pursue our disagreements civilly, however, we guard against such errors. We do this by inviting the sort of dialogue that allows us and our interlocutors to state our positions clearly, ask questions, provide feedback and clarification, and then reason together based on these newfound insights.²⁴ Such clarity makes possible the second of our two goods: reconciliation.

²⁴ In so doing, civil disagreement encourages both *discernment* and *evaluation*, practices that William Galston includes as virtues of the liberal state. Liberalism requires a critical mass of citizens to have these virtues, for the sake of careful voting. Thus, we might say that liberal democracies have a *particular* stake in the practice of civil disagreement. (Galston 1991: 224.)

3.3 Reconciliation

By reconciliation I once again have in mind several things, along the following spectrum:

Clear Cases

R1) We discover that we don't actually disagree after all

R2) We disagreed formerly, but now you've persuaded me to your side

Subtler Cases

R3) We continue to disagree, but you learn something (about my reasons or background commitments) that casts my position in a more favorable light

R4) We continue to disagree, perhaps deeply, but you learn something about my position that helps you counter it in the public square—persuading *others*, if not me

Clarity lies at the root of each of these cases. And in each one, that clarity brings us closer to our interlocutors (or others like them) than we were before, hence why I've dubbed them forms of "reconciliation."

To begin, take (R1). In rare but precious cases, we may discover that we don't *actually* disagree after all. Faux disagreements of this sort might arise, e.g., when two communities, not accustomed to interacting with each other, use different words to denote the same concept. A commoner case is when our views toward another party are based solely on hearsay.

A tragic instance of the latter occurred at Middlebury College in 2017, when the conservative scholar Dr. Charles Murray was invited to lecture. His host, the liberal professor Dr. Allison Stranger, invited Murray "in order to demonstrate publicly a commitment to a free and fair exchange of ideas in [her] classroom" (Stranger 2017). Yet, as Stranger puts it, "Dr. Murray was drowned out by students who never let him speak, and [the two of them] were attacked and

intimidated while trying to leave campus,” with Stranger suffering whiplash and a concussion. She describes the genesis of the riot as follows:

Part of the problem was the furor that preceded the talk. This past month, as the campus uproar about Dr. Murray’s visit built, I was genuinely surprised and troubled to learn that *some of my faculty colleagues had rendered judgment on Dr. Murray’s work and character without ever having read anything he has written*...Intelligent students of the Middlebury community—including some of my own students and advisees—concluded that Charles Murray was an anti-gay white nationalist from what they were hearing from one another, and what they read on the Southern Poverty Law Center Website. Never mind that Dr. Murray supports same-sex marriage and is a member of the courageous “never Trump” wing of the Republican Party...*Faulty information became the catalyst for shutting off the free exchange of ideas at Middlebury.* (Stranger 2017, my emphasis)

I quote this exchange at length because of its vividness. Doubtless, one could find large numbers of similar incidents, from both sides of the political spectrum. The point is this: we are fallible beings—a fact so important for Mill, that it generates one of his strongest arguments for free speech (2011: 1018). Therefore, we must not assume that we know our disagreements to be genuine. It is through civil dialogue—whether in person or, e.g., in print²⁵—that we assess each supposed conflict.

One might object that what the Middlebury incident lacked was not a civil audience but one merely willing to *let Murray speak*, regardless of its manner.²⁶ I grant that Murray needed the freedom to speak, but I also maintain he needed more. For if “ruthless disagreement,” with its close connection to anger, has the tendency I suggested earlier, we can assume that a “ruthless” audience (or speaker) would have resulted in one of two outcomes: the ending of real conversation or the loss of fairmindedness for one or both parties. Either result would have failed to expose the false assumptions driving the division.

²⁵ Adler and Van Doren offer extensive guidance on how to engage civilly with a text (1972: Chapters 10-11).

²⁶ I thank an anonymous reviewer for this important suggestion.

Not all disagreements prove illusory, however. For those that aren't, meaningful forms of reconciliation remain. Take (R2). If we approach those disagreements civilly and with a fair mind, one or more parties may be persuaded on some point. As Adler and Van Doren remind us, we should “regard disagreements as capable of being resolved” (1972: 147). After all, if we're being responsible agents then we hold our beliefs on the basis of reasons—reasons that can be *shared*, but which are unlikely to be received *fairly* unless we present them in a form our opponents can stomach.²⁷

Suppose, though, neither side is persuaded. Even then, civility hasn't failed us, for the clarity that results from such an exchange may cast our disagreement in a different light (i.e., (R3)). This might occur in at least two ways—both important, though differing in scope. The first way appeals narrowly to that class of people committed to Rawlsian political liberalism, with its premium on “public reasons.” Insofar as civil disagreement makes it possible to dialogue across differences (especially *worldview* differences, where our divide is deepest and thus where real communication is least likely to occur), we may discover that the arguments of our interlocutors are more “public,” that is, less sectarian or worldview-dependent, than we supposed. This matters, since, as Brandon Morgan-Olsen notes, “To identify an argument as nonpublic is, for political liberals, to consider it unfit for political consideration. As a result, [this identification] can serve to bar the individual who forwarded it from effective political participation, at least in this instance” (2013: 189). Such debarment is likely to engender ill will among its recipients, who will feel their concerns have gone unheard. And yet, as Morgan-Olsen notes, it can be *genuinely difficult* to identify public reasons in the arguments of one's interlocutor, which raises the fear that

²⁷ Galston repeatedly cites the importance of “persuasion” for liberal societies, noting how those who attempt persuasion avoid the coercive tactics liberalism has historically sought to resist (1991: 213-237). Insofar as civil disagreement aids persuasion, it truly does constitute a liberal virtue.

some arguments will be unfairly dismissed (2013: 196-202). Insofar as civil disagreement helps us correct such errors, by sustaining a fruitful conversation long enough to identify them, then it will advance (R3) in two respects. Those who discover public reasons among their interlocutors will have, in principle, further grounds for respecting their opponents, while the opponents themselves are more likely to feel gratitude for being heard. All this can happen, *even if* the argument in question remains unpersuasive.

As for the second and broader form (R3) might take, recall my example about the hateful bumper sticker. Those who have seen such stickers, or who have met people who embodied that approach to border security, might conclude that *everyone* opposed to open borders had a similar motivation. Imagine their surprise, then, when they learn it is possible to hold this view for reasons other than animus or ignorance. Even if such people persist in advocating for open borders, this revelation ought to transform the character of their debates with the other side. It uncovers the possibility of a “good will,” something Kant recognized as supremely precious (*Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* 4:393). In such cases, the person who holds his or her view for reasons other than animus becomes no longer an enemy but one with whom one *merely* disagrees. In today’s divided world, this might be the best we can hope for, in many cases. Yet it seems to me no small gain.

This last point is so important that it warrants framing as a general principle, to guide our public interactions. Call it the “Many Paths Principle” (MPP).

MPP: For almost any view, x , one might arrive at x in various ways, as well as hold it from a good, bad, or indifferent will.²⁸

²⁸ Perhaps some view exists which cannot be held with a good will, hence why I use the qualifier “almost.” I suspect these are the exception, though, and that we must be far less ready than we are at present to assert this quality about our opponents’ views.

I might assume you arrived at your view in an irresponsible manner—perhaps because I’ve never met anyone who *hadn’t* arrived at that view irresponsibly—only to learn that you have one or more good arguments for it. As for the “will” with which you hold (or profess) your view, it presumably matters whether, e.g., you assert *x* because you believe it’s true or simply to benefit you in some way—by securing votes, say, or by helping you advance in a changing world. Such differences make a difference. They affect how we classify, and even treat, those who disagree with us. In short, by approaching our disagreements civilly, we increase our chances of identifying *how* and *with what* “will” our interlocutors arrived at *x*, and this has moral implications.²⁹

Yet perhaps even (R3) expects too much. After all, don’t we sometimes hold our views out of some mixture of ill will, stubbornness, or ignorance? Depressing though it is, all of us have likely met people with whom our disagreements are genuine, people who prove all-but-impossible to persuade, and whose reasons or background commitments offer nothing that engenders our respect. Does civility fail in such cases? Has the link between clarity and reconciliation broken down at last? No. For even in such cases, the possibility of reconciliation remains, albeit with others.³⁰ Few are those views held by a *solitary* person, views for which other people have *no* affinity. There is almost always someone else who either believes, or may be tempted to believe, the view you encounter in cases like (R4). Such people might be your friends, family, or neighbors, a future student, or whoever. Thus, when we persist in disagreeing civilly, even in situations like (R4), the resulting clarity may help us save *others* from following a similar path. We are better able to meet pernicious views “head on” when we understand why people actually hold them;

²⁹ For a paper that explores the political implications of something like the MPP when applied in the area of religious commitments, see Crowder 2014: 818-840. See also Walzer’s discussion of voting (1999: 63-64), for a brief survey of the many paths by which voters select their candidate. I’m using the MPP in a broader sense, though these papers provide instances of it.

³⁰ We ought not to dismiss the possibility that people of the sort I’ve been describing might reconcile with us at some *future* time. Human beliefs and characters are dynamic; our display of respect toward such people (coupled with the arguments we present) might plant a seed that bears fruit in another season.

otherwise, our objections will not hit their mark. Civil disagreement—futile though it might otherwise seem in the case of a stubborn interlocutor—can help us access this information, storing it away for future use.

In sum, civil disagreement promotes effective dialogue, which promotes clarity; and it is this clarity—of speakers’ *actual* beliefs, their *real* reasons, and of what *truly* is the case—which lays the basis for important forms of reconciliation, as sketched above. We have ample reason to value clarity and reconciliation and, thus, to desire such means as might reasonably bring them about. An honest look at our cultural landscape reveals a desperate need for reconciliation, lest our divisions destroy any hope for a common life. Yet what of clarity? In the next section, I will sketch six salient features of contemporary society that challenge our ability to arrive at clarity today. Though not exhaustive, these suffice to underscore the need for civil disagreement, if we hope to overcome our present difficulties.

4. Steep Challenges for Clarity Today

First, as already noted, we inhabit a pluralistic society. When we disagree on such fundamental matters as the origin of the universe, the existence and nature of God, the sources of authority (moral and otherwise), and the extent of our own autonomy—in short, when we hold radically different worldviews—we run a high risk of misunderstanding one another. I’m likely to regard my neighbor’s disagreement on a whole host of matters related to ethics or public policy as being ignorant or evil, not realizing the deeper roots of that person’s beliefs. That is, I’m likely to do so unless we *expose* those roots through careful dialogue.

And there’s the rub. As polarization intensifies, making our disagreements increasingly bitter—even dangerous, at times—we will not *want* to engage in such dialogue. Better to retreat

to our likeminded ghettos, physical or virtual, where we can be safe. This polarization is the second feature. When joined with the abovementioned worldview diversity, it creates a serious obstacle to our arriving at clarity of the sort sketched in (C1)-(C3).

Add to these a third challenge: the frenetic pace of modern life. Many of us simply lack the time to explore matters deeply—or, at best, can research that small number of issues most important to us. Even if we wanted to increase our awareness, we’re pulled upon in so many directions as to make this difficult, at best.

Yet when we *do* attempt to explore some matter, we face a series of further challenges. The fourth is a climate of distraction. The phone pings with our latest text message, our apps or social media feeds tempt us a mere click away, the television blares unwanted in the waiting room. Even when we make it to that site that promises information, we now face a slew of advertisements or hyperlinks to other pages which, if we’re not careful, we’ll find ourselves clicking before we’ve finished the very sentence that contains them. Perhaps the “we” here doesn’t apply to academic philosophers, but, if my experience in the classroom resembles yours, it certainly applies to our students and the millions like them, who, rather than pondering Plato or Aristotle, flit to their phones (even unwittingly) the moment a seconds-long break ensues. In such a climate, concentration withers like a thirsty plant. And yet, as Maggie Jackson informs us, our attention “span” is quite literally that: a “bridge toward one another and higher thinking” (Myers 2008).³¹ As it erodes, so too does our ability to ponder and sort through the complex problems and ideas of our age.

³¹ See the interview “Maggie Jackson on the Importance of Attentiveness in Sustaining Personal and Social Order,” (Track 3, Minute 2:30). This interview centered on Jackson’s book *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2009).

Much of the previous point centers on the distractions endemic to our modern technologies. Yet, if Neil Postman is correct, such technologies do more than divert our attention; they condition us to view the world according to their own limitations. Take the following passage from Postman regarding how this applies in the domain of television news.

I offer the following description of television news by Robert MacNeil, executive editor and co-anchor of the “MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour.” The idea, he writes, “is to keep everything brief, not to strain the attention of anyone... You are required...to pay attention to no concept, no character, and no problem for more than a few seconds at a time. [MacNeil] goes on to say that the assumptions controlling a news show are “that bite-sized is best, that complexity must be avoided, that nuances are dispensable, that qualifications impede the simple message, that visual stimulation is a substitute for thought, and that verbal precision is an anachronism.” (Postman 1985: 105)

So, as Postman argues, we come to *expect* the world to lack nuance or statements to eschew qualification, etc. Though he focused on the effects of television, we can extrapolate Postman’s principles to 21st Century forms of communication. Thus, those who consume a steady diet of tweets, e.g., may come to expect all matters of public policy to be resolved—or at least fairly summarized—in 280 characters. Yet if justice demands that we attend not only to the “what” of our neighbors’ beliefs (C1) but also the “why” (C2), not to mention the complexities involved in arguing for “what *really is* the case” (C3), such expectations fail to fit reality. They obscure rather than clarify.

One final challenge for clarity, often noted but no less important, is the partisan bias of our news outlets and the way they cater to our demand for instant information. Solzhenitsyn captured the latter well:

Because instant and credible information has to be given, it becomes necessary to resort to guesswork, rumors, and suppositions to fill in the voids, and none—and none of them will ever be rectified; they will stay on in the readers’ memories. How many hasty, immature, superficial, and misleading judgements are expressed every day, confusing readers, without any verification. (1978)

If these words of Solzhenitsyn’s applied in 1978, how much more so several decades later, with the advent of 24-hour news networks and the internet, and the bald unleashing of partisan bias?³²

My point is this: we have many reasons to doubt our level of clarity today. If we face such challenges to clarity, then we ought to value those practices that will combat them. And that means appreciating the need for civility in public life.³³

5. Objections

If my central claims about the effects of civil disagreement are correct, then I take it I’ve met the objection, epitomized by Mill, that civility has neutral epistemic value. Again, I’m presuming that if Mill thought civility had this value, he would have included it among those virtues comprising “the real morality of public discussion.” Nevertheless, several further objections to the value of civil disagreement remain. They amount to saying that the epistemic fruits of civility are, at best, a mixed bag—some good, others bad. I seek to counter that depiction. Yet even if I can, one might still worry (as Mill did) that the practice of civil disagreement faces a serious *practical* obstacle. I will conclude by addressing Mill’s concern.

5.1 Epistemic Objections

First, in response to Kennedy’s claim that civility norms restrict certain forms of criticism that ought not to be restricted, thereby weakening the “substance” of our debates, I reply that this only

³² As I write this, the prominent staff writer and editor Bari Weiss has just resigned from the *New York Times*, citing, among other reasons, “the ‘new McCarthyism’ that has taken root at the paper of record.” See <https://www.bariweiss.com/resignation-letter>. That an accusation of this sort should fall upon so prestigious a news outlet further underscores my point. If true, these challenges to clarity respect no pedigree.

³³ Alternatively, as one reviewer noted, we might argue that these obstacles are so great as to make the project of civil disagreement impracticable. I grant that the obstacles are great, but not that they are insurmountable. Surely all, or nearly all, of us can point to *some* experience with overcoming obstacles to clarity. Those who specialize in overcoming such obstacles can boast of more. See, e.g., the organization “Braver Angels,” formed to promote grassroots, bi-partisan dialogue following the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, at www.braverangels.org.

follows if you endorse a view of civility which regards the practice as mere niceness or politeness. Yet I called this approach to disagreement a vice—specifically, the vice of “deficiency” on an Aristotelian framework. Real, substantive civility allows us to ask hard questions, even regarding the motives of one’s interlocutor (something Kennedy’s treatment of civility denies), provided we do so in ways consistent with this person’s worth. This might be done, e.g., in ways that are dispassionate, that refrain from inflammatory language, and that balance one’s suspicions with the need for due process.

Additionally, Kennedy worries that too great a concern about what Stephen Carter has called our “civility crisis” distracts us from dealing with the real and pressing justice issues of the day (2001). In other words, insofar as incivility *is* a problem, it pales in comparison with issues like poverty or racism, etc. I grant that we must not focus myopically on the problem of incivility; our life together is fraught with many issues demanding our concern. Yet, if my account of civility’s epistemic benefits is correct, with its implications for morality, then we can no longer view incivility as a merely peripheral matter. If our uncivil approaches to disagreement lead us to misunderstand our neighbors’ positions in crucial ways, and if we build policies or norms on the basis of those misunderstandings, then we risk committing serious justice issues on par with other social ills.³⁴

Third, whereas some worry that civility norms prevent the disempowered from using the tactics needed to gain a serious hearing from those in power, I claim that this is not necessarily

³⁴ See, e.g., the statement released by “12 Leading Scholars,” including Peter Singer and Thomas Kelly, arguing that “Philosophers Should Not Be Sanctioned Over Their Positions on Sex and Gender” (2019). The authors respond to a growing movement to “censure or silence colleagues” who voice “skepticism about the concept of gender identity” or oppose attempts “to replac[e] biological sex with gender identity in institutional policy making.” One of the reasons these authors oppose such sanctions is that “none of the arguments recently made by [their] colleagues can reasonably be regarded as incitement or hate speech”—in other words, that it is possible for these dissenters to hold the positions they do in good will, or at least not in animus. Insofar as the proposed censures *presume* animus, then, short of corroborating evidence, their application is unjust.

true. Nina Lozano-Reich and Dana Cloud, e.g., hold that things like sit-ins and protests don't align with civility and yet that such tactics have proven necessary, historically, to correct social ills (2009: 221). Yet I see no reason why the version of civil disagreement I offer bars sit-ins or protests—provided, once again, that demonstrators employ these tactics in ways consistent with the worth of the other. One needn't scream profanity or call one's opponents bigots to join a picket line or refuse to leave a lunch counter. Indeed, we have examples from history of demonstrators refraining from such tactics and proving enormously successful, in part because of the respect they engendered from their approach (from the broader public, if not from their oppressors). Such people employed what Boyd calls a “critical moral standard” (2006: 874). Indeed, it seems reasonable to think that those who succeed in gaining their oppressors' attention through the employment of civil strategies have a *greater* chance of being understood. In these cases, the oppressors won't have been epistemically compromised from tactics that incite unnecessary anger or resentment.

Fourth, one might think that some people are so blinded by hatred or ignorance that one can only hope to reach them by “shocking” such people into reality—and that incivility (i.e., ruthless disagreement) provides the needed electric pulse. Yet, as Amy Olberding notes, this tactic assumes implausible things about the offenders in question.

It takes a hardy moral character to receive a slap as a summons to be good. But why would I think that one so low in my opinion will not just rise but soar to heights of circumspection, receiving disrespect as a provocation to be better? If she's bad enough to need a punch, she's not likely good enough to take it well and change. The far more likely outcome is that she'll answer with the like, return the punch, and we together will descend at speed into a gutter war for social dominance. (2019)

Though it's *possible* that incivility could rouse another person from moral slumber, the chances of this happening are too slim to make incivility a default response to stubbornness or ignorance.

Fifth, some might object that civil disagreement promotes clarity only insofar as our interlocutors speak in good faith. That is, it only works when such people *want* to promote clarity about what they believe and why, or about what is in fact the case. Yet surely, say the objectors, this is naïve. Those with bad motives desire confusion, not clarity, the better to exploit their neighbors. This I also grant. Doubtless, some unknown number of people will engage in bad faith; and when they do, we may be deceived. Two strangers who engage in a one-time dispute have limited means at their disposal of detecting insincerity. Yet, when the opponents in question are not strangers but family members or neighbors or co-workers, we stand a better chance. Their life will often speak for them. Things they say and do may validate or invalidate their professed position, especially over time. This gives us grounds for thinking that the clarity and reconciliation civility promises do in fact hang within our grasp. What's more, let us hope there are many people who, did they but *know* the fruits of civility, would choose good-faith engagements for the sake of those fruits. Not everyone wants deceit.

Sixth, some might argue that civility conflicts with our ability to engage authentically in debate. It forces us to suppress what we truly feel or think and, thus, makes us insincere (Mount 1973: 40-41).³⁵ But does it? Sure, it puts a limit on some things, like violence or screaming down our neighbors, but it seems to me to allow other expressions of how we feel. Civil people can honestly admit that what their interlocutor said makes them angry, e.g., or that they think their opponent is wrong. Civility only restricts what they *do* with said anger. Indeed, it might be best that we acknowledge our feelings in debate, the better to ensure that we control them, and so that we can get beyond them to the rational source of the controversy (Adler and Van Doren 1972: 152-167).

³⁵ Note that Mount himself rejects this objection to civility.

Moreover, if we have good reason to think we lack clarity about the beliefs of our neighbors, this should give us pause. What if our “sincere” and “authentic” expressions of outrage stem from a misunderstanding about our neighbors’ actual beliefs? If my arguments in the previous section hit their mark, then we have good reason to think we stand (or will stand) in precisely this situation today. To unleash our hostility on people who don’t deserve it is to commit a grave injustice.

Before leaving this section, I must make an important concession to the proponents of incivility. I take it that many of the uncivil acts we see around us are motivated by *anger*, and anger does have an epistemic function. If, e.g., we are engaged in conversation on some topic and I find myself becoming angry in the process, this *signifies* something. It gives me direct (though not infallible) evidence that something I hold dear has been violated (Nussbaum 2016).³⁶ Perhaps you’ve offended my deeply held moral or religious beliefs, my sense of self-worth, or my convictions about how rational creatures ought to engage in responsible inquiry. In so doing, anger gives clarity.

Nevertheless, it does not follow that because anger lends clarity at the *outset* of some dispute, it therefore lends further clarity *throughout* the dispute. In fact, I think it does the reverse. Having established that I’m angry, it remains for me to determine several things: what it is I believe you’ve done to rouse my anger; whether my belief is mistaken; how much anger is warranted, assuming my belief isn’t mistaken; and what a just response to the offense would be. Anger offers little, if any, help in answering these questions. Indeed, to consider the last of them, Seneca notes the tendency of anger to get “out of control,” desiring “retribution not just ‘if it is right’ but at all costs.” It is “a motion [of the mind] which *outleaps* reason and drags it along” (1995: 45, 44).

³⁶ See also my discussion in Section 3.1.

Thus, in some respects at least, anger doesn't just impede rationality but may actually be irrational.³⁷ In contrast, what I need is the ability to engage in further, careful dialogue with you and to remain fair minded. Having done its initial job of *identifying* our dispute, I now need my anger to get out of the way. This holds especially true if I want to persuade you to adopt a different view. You'll need arguments, not insults or raised voices, and anger inclines me toward the latter. For these reasons, then, we can acknowledge anger's epistemic contribution while resisting the larger claim that we should pursue angry dialogue for the sake of increased clarity.

5.2 A Practical Objection

Even if you accept the benefits of civil disagreement at a theoretical level, you might still worry about the practicality of this discussion, given the following tension. I've suggested that we show civility toward others when we dispute their ideas in ways that respect those persons' intrinsic worth. Yet what if neighbors disagree about the precise behaviors and forms of language such worth requires? I initially addressed this in Section 2, with my mention of a *sufficient* overlap in our understanding of what counts as respectful for us to begin the act of civil disagreement; still, a further answer seems warranted. What if what offends *my* sense of dignity seems to you a perfectly respectful way of conducting disputes? Mill puts it thus:

Much might be said on the impossibility of fixing where these supposed bounds are to be placed; for if the test be *offence* to those whose opinion is attacked, I think experience testifies that this offence is given whenever the attack is telling and powerful, and that every opponent who pushes them hard, and whom they find it difficult to answer, appears to them, if he shows any strong feeling on the subject, an intemperate opponent. (2011: 1036, my emphasis)

³⁷ Nussbaum furthers this point about the irrationality of anger (2016).

I don't dispute Mill's observation: we *do* sometimes take offense at the mere fact that others disagree with us, regardless of the manner in which they do so. Yet I reject the idea that this undermines my thesis or somehow minimizes its practicality.

Mill only considers one possible criterion for the bounds of civility: the *recipient's own sense* of what counts as offensive. Yet this hardly exhausts the options. For starters, why not take as the criterion something like the Golden Rule? Faced with some dispute, we could ask ourselves, "Would I want others to disagree with me in the manner I'm now using toward them?" If the answer is no, then, in the interest of fairness, we should change tactics.

This suggestion shifts the criterion of offensiveness from the *recipient's* viewpoint to that of that of the *sender*. For a different proposal that makes the same basic move, consider the following: faced with some dispute, I ask myself, "Can I honestly say, in all truthfulness and good will, that I am disagreeing with my neighbors in ways consistent with their worth? Could I make a good-faith defense of my conduct, if pressed?" If not, I again change tactics.

These two counterproposals (and especially the latter, to which I'm partial) have an important benefit. They better align with the pluralistic nature of contemporary society. After all, standards of respectfulness are, to a certain degree, *relative* to a give culture or sub-culture. What one group demands as a pillar of respectful treatment might seriously offend the conscience of its neighbors—and vice versa. In contrast, my proposal respects the *intentions* of the sender when evaluating what counts as civil.³⁸ It allows us to distinguish between ill-meaning and well-meaning offense, that is, between those offenses that are deliberate and those that result merely (albeit

³⁸ Contrast this claim with Calhoun's proposal, which explicitly denies a place for the senders' intentions when judging what counts as civil (2000: 266, footnote 23). On Calhoun's view, the criterion for civility is "social closure" or "extensive social consensus" (p., 271). It is a notable feature of this account that social closure does not require unanimity, thus leaving open the possibility that one's worldview might not accord with the consensus reached by one's broader society.

regrettably) from sincere differences of worldview.³⁹ There may be a line beyond which no amount of sincerity can overcome the inherent disrespectfulness of a given practice. Yet, in general, this sensitivity to the intentions of the sender makes for a view of civility that is more just and more in keeping with the worldview diversity of modern society.

Nevertheless, some might still object at this shift from the recipient to the sender as the measure of incivility. Doesn't it given too much room for those with ill motives to abandon restraint and embrace incivility, provided they mask it well? Doubtless it could, but, then again, *any* ethical system or injunction is vulnerable to abuse at the hands of people with bad intentions. Yet if the case for civil disagreement's value, both epistemic and moral, is as strong as I've suggested, and if we understand that case, then we can't pursue such tactics with a clear conscience. The goods of clarity, reconciliation—and, yes, the worth of our neighbors—loom too large for us not to care.⁴⁰

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³⁹ For a fuller treatment of this distinction, to include some cautions, see Love 2017a-b.

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