

ON THE VIRTUES OF INHOSPITALITY: TOWARD AN ETHICS OF PUBLIC REASON AND CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract: This article seeks to reconceptualize Rawlsian public reason as a critical tool against ideological propaganda. The article proposes that public reason, as a standard for public discourse, must be conceptualized beyond its mandate for comprehensive neutrality to additionally emphasize critique of ideologically driven ignorance and propaganda in the public realm. I connect uncritical hospitality to such ideological propaganda with Harry Frankfurt's concept of bullshit. This paper proposes that philosophers have a unique moral obligation to engage bullshit critically in the public sphere. The obligation for such critique, I argue, represents philosophy's essential moral component in a society committed to the protection of free speech and deliberative democracy.

INTRODUCTION

The argument I offer below posits that profitable civil discourse in the public realm must be preserved through sustained public inhospitality to ideological demagoguery. I argue that free speech can be of value only to a society willing to temper civil discourse with inhospitality to ideological propaganda and counterfactual assertions made in the public realm. To reject the form of hospitality that I will call "complicit hospitality" is not to be against civility. "Complicit hospitality" is the name I give to the misguided toleration of clearly recognizable nonsense, punditry, or propaganda in the public sphere. The existence of complicit hospitality is related to the ideological misunderstanding of "balance" as an ethical standard toward which intellectual and public discourse should strive. I argue instead that appropriate public discourse is represented by the Rawlsian conception of public reason with its commitment

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to fact-based neutrality. I will show how the conflation of balance with neutrality encourages the bullshit identified by Harry Frankfurt as a salient feature of modern society. In doing so, I will link bullshit to the complicit hospitality I seek to indict as undermining of informed public discourse.¹ In what follows, I propose no legal prohibitions against speech. My argument is an ethical one regarding the responsibility of individuals to promote and defend informed public discourse.

Informed public discourse entails the presence and pervasive use of arguments or argumentative positions consistent with available evidence, which all reasonable people ought to be able to understand, if not endorse, independently of ideological commitments.² In part, then, here I seek to promote the Rawlsian "duty of civility" buttressed by the application of public reason. Yet I will also emphasize and elevate the tacit mandate of public reason to critique and condemn uses of ideological propaganda in the public realm. The critical mandate of public reason, I insist, has a moral component consistent with the foundational justification of liberal democracy—and the moral significance of philosophy itself. I will show that public reason preserves free speech precisely because it prompts critique, which, I maintain, ought to involve the avoidance of complicit hospitality.³ In doing so, public reason fulfills its mandate to secure appropriate ideological neutrality (in part) through the explicit critique of unwarranted ideological assertions in the public sphere. Call this our duty to "critical civility."

In Part 1 of this paper, I defend the role of public reason in public discourse. In defending public reason, I also reconceptualize it and Rawls's "duty to civility" as a necessary ethical mandate in the public sphere, which derives from ethical commitments implicit to philosophy.⁴ I identify the minimal ethical stance I claim to be inherent to philosophy itself as a species of moral fallibilism, which I label "moral agnosticism."

In Part 2 of what follows, I argue that the consequent duty of civility entails a critical stance vital to the maintenance of public reason and the preservation of constructive public discourse. Among other things, our duty of civility requires the active challenging of flagrantly false or dubious, ideologically dependent, public assertions. In making this claim, I will argue that in accepting public reason, with its (negative) duty to refrain from ideologically comprehensive arguments, one takes on a tacit (positive) duty to protect public space from such arguments. In contrast, I identify public hospitality to spurious claims as being conducive to what Harry Frankfurt has called "bullshit." I argue that complicit hospitality occurs when one tolerates recognizably inappropriate public discourse and is able to challenge it effectively but does not. I will clarify my conception of complicit hospitality with reference to recent scholarship on the topic of complicity by Chiara Lepora and Robert E. Goodin. Additionally, I will emphasize the consequences my argument has for those with greater access to the public sphere. In particular, I will emphasize the duty of journalists to avoid what I refer to as complicit hospitality.

In Part 3, I address anticipated objections to the positions articulated below. Specifically, I address likely concerns over the practical consequences of

my position, including its consequences for free speech. Part 4 provides summary recommendations with particular focus on implications for philosophers.

PART 1

There is good reason to embrace and defend civility in public discourse. The duty of civility is one condition of a sustainable free society. Properly understood, civility is no shallow fetishizing of politeness; it is a procedural framework that provides the conditions for constructive public discourse. The duty of civility, consistent with the Rawlsian usage, is a responsibility to support this procedural framework and to abide by its constraints.⁵ The Rawlsian duty of civility manifests in the procedural adoption of public reason. Such is the case, according to Rawls, because a pluralistic society consisting of value-laden, metaphysically controversial comprehensive doctrines is the inevitable consequence of free inquiry in a non-repressive society. This plurality stems from a basic fact of logic: specifically, the fact that logical validity is distinct from ontological truth. Rational people can, do, and will disagree; this circumstance leads to a crucial question of contemporary liberal political theory: How are we to progress amicably as a people divided by numerous comprehensive differences?⁶

In a liberal democracy, it is not reasonable to settle legislative matters by appealing to the book of Genesis, or to any comprehensively grounded religious text or doctrine, for the following reasons: (1) Reliance on metaphysically contentious foundations in public debate guarantees an entrenched conflict that has the potential to undermine political and economic stability in the long term. In other words, such rhetorical tactics breed incivility in a morally pluralistic public sphere. (2) Comprehensive doctrines tend to have a distorting effect on the public understanding of scientific and historical facts, especially when such doctrines are given uncritical voice in the public realm (this latter point finds increasing support in cognitive science).⁷ In turn, misinformation in public discourse reinforces ideological doctrines and engenders a vicious spiral of increasingly ideological, rhetorically sustained, dogma. Accordingly, comprehensive divisions become enlarged and entrenched as political speech divides along isolated epistemological and moral battle lines. This is, in part, how a civilly cooperative and diverse society becomes dysfunctional. The duty of civility announced by Rawls is upheld through the thoughtful application of public reason in debates concerning issues of basic justice and democratic procedure. Public reason as traditionally understood, therefore, serves as a needed inoculant against ideological entrenchment. The need for adherence to public reason is most clearly displayed when issues of science clash with, or indeed pose an epistemological threat to, value-laden comprehensive doctrines.

As Rawls implies with regard to his guidelines for public inquiry, public reason must not only avoid comprehensive arguments, it must also rely on scientific consensus when such consensus is available.⁸ I argue that this procedural stipulation for public debate ought to extend beyond issues of constitutional essentials and basic justice to all issues of legislative concern where scientific

data is decisive for a proper understanding of the issues at hand (e.g., anthropogenic global warming).⁹ There are other forms of counterfactual denialism involving not science but history, which are equally undermining of informed public discourse. One example is Holocaust denialism.¹⁰ Another, common in contemporary American politics, is the rhetorical tactic of referring to the United States as a nation founded on Christian doctrine.¹¹ This latter claim requires selective ignorance regarding important historical documents and the willful misinterpretation of others.¹² Nevertheless, the repeated utterance of such claims can have distorting effects on public awareness, making it easier to accept misinformation as truth.¹³ Because so much counterfactual denialism is predicated upon comprehensive ideological commitments, the most ready strategy to counter it—and to counter other forms of ideological denialism—is a commitment to public reason. The necessity of public reason derives from the moral pluralism that marks any free society. So long as we tolerate religious and political diversity in society, a commitment to public reason remains a necessary condition of responsible public discourse.

I maintain that public reason ought to be adopted as a form of ethical commitment in and of itself, as well as a method for negotiating entrenched metaphysical controversies. On its surface, this assertion might seem inconsistent with Rawlsian public reason in the sense that public reason, per Rawls, must remain independent of comprehensive commitments. Thus, to say that public reason is itself a form of ethical commitment invites the question of how it can remain noncomprehensive in its own right.¹⁴ Yet here we must notice how reasoned critique marks the foundational ethical task of philosophy and how public reason provides an essential model for such reasoned critique in the public sphere.¹⁵ I maintain that the essential ethical task of philosophy is made manifest by the necessary commitment to reasoned discourse essential to philosophical practice. To embrace reason over force involves precisely this minimum moral commitment. The shared assumption made with the concept of public reason, by all philosophical discourse as well as by science, is that one must provide evidential reasons for one's conclusions, moral or otherwise, before one can expect to be taken seriously by others. In undertaking the practice of philosophical argument—as opposed, for example, to violent conquest or coerced indoctrination—one recognizes the requirement that reasons be given that *in principle* other reasonable people can accept. Indeed, that the interests of others are taken seriously enough that one concedes an obligation to provide an account of reasoned justification to them regarding one's actions or beliefs. This is transcendently substantiated: if one disagrees, then one is obliged to offer reasons for the disagreement, thus implicitly endorsing the premise. If one counters that the burden falls upon s/he who asserts the thesis—the result is the same: we agree that justification must be offered. There could be no burden of proof regarding the necessity of justification unless the proposition “one must provide reasons for one's conclusions” is itself true.

To engage in philosophical discourse is to accept the proposition (common to Rawlsian public reason) that our claims ought to have no communal influence absent reasoned justification. Consequently, the practice of philos-

ophy, like the application of public reason, implicitly involves an effort to persuade by virtue of arguments that other reasonable people can, in principle, understand and agree upon.¹⁶ Thus, philosophical argument in itself progresses, as does public reason applied to public discourse, by attempting to offer compelling justifications that any reasonable person can in theory accept.¹⁷

The governing intent of public reason in public discourse, and philosophical discourse in general, is the need to justify one's position to others who may not be sympathetic to one's own comprehensive commitments. Public reason is therefore pluralistic in nature since it recognizes the existence of differing views integrally. Insofar as reasonable people recognize their own fallibility, they recognize the need to provide justifications that are independent of comprehensive and potentially controversial metaphysical commitments. This is an implicitly ethical consideration, because recognizing one's own fallibility and the obligation to justify one's claims is itself recognition that others have interests and are moral agents.

Taking the interests of others seriously enough to recognize that they should not be coerced but are owed a reasoned account is inherently moral.¹⁸ To take the interests of others into consideration involves a universal moral point of view that takes others' interests as *prima facie* worthy of equal consideration with one's own.¹⁹ I refer to the implicit moral position of philosophy, for which I argue, as moral agnosticism:

Moral agnosticism, as I would like to call it, arises from a rational analysis and recognition of epistemological limitations—limitations that preclude one from being dogmatically certain of anything.²⁰

As a consequence of moral agnosticism, one is obligated to justify one's beliefs to others if one would influence them and equally obligated not to force one's beliefs on others without reasoned justification.²¹

PART 2

The question arises as to how public reason informed by a commitment to moral agnosticism (or philosophical discourse itself) can be practiced and maintained in political speech. I am not suggesting that public figures be penalized legally for irresponsible speech. Rather, I am making the claim that those in positions of public influence have a responsibility to defend the tenants of public reason. If we accept that there is good reason to stick to the principle of public reason in public discourse, then it should follow that there is good reason to protect public space for constructive use of public reason. It might strike some as counterintuitive that in accepting the negative responsibility to refrain from ideologically controversial arguments one accrues a positive responsibility to challenge such arguments in the public sphere. Yet in committing to restrict oneself to public reason, one has crucially endorsed the view that some forms of discourse are harmful and inappropriate to the public sphere. Having accepted the latter position, I argue, it is contradictory to maintain that harmful and inappropriate claims made by others nevertheless should be permitted

in the public sphere without challenge. Consequently, those who recognize the necessity of public reason for informed public discourse have a significant moral obligation to (when possible) resolutely challenge misleading assertions in political discourse, and the public realm, which are inconsistent with the constraints of public reason.²²

If one can publicly challenge and counter recognizably harmful breaches of public reason but neglects to do so, then I claim one is morally complicit in harms resulting from irresponsible discourse. As an example by analogy, consider the situation presented by Henrik Ibsen in *An Enemy of the People* (1882). In Ibsen's play, the heroic but ultimately maligned figure of Dr. Stockmann speaks out in public defiance of popular opinion, political pressures, and financial incentives. Dr. Stockmann denounces and refutes the continued marketing of bath waters, which he knows to be dangerously polluted, to unsuspecting tourists. If Dr. Stockmann failed to speak out unequivocally against the counterfactual claims asserted by his village's political and financial authorities (say, because he was uncomfortable with public confrontations), then the character would be morally complicit in the harms his silence helped to enable.²³ He would be morally complicit without needing to also be an active participant in the promotion of the tainted baths. Nonparticipation in a wrong does not constitute the washing of one's hands from that wrong or necessarily end one's contribution to the atmosphere enabling the wrong to continue. Ibsen recognizes that silent and disapproving toleration of falsehood is morally equivalent to and even indistinguishable from acceptance and approval. I hasten to add that silent hospitality to harmful misinformation in the public sector is corrosive to healthy public discourse without one needing to directly participate in the misinformation.

In raising this comparison, I am endorsing the minimal threshold for complicity that is defined by Chiara Lepora and Robert E. Goodin. In *On Complicity and Compromise* (2013) they write:

... there is a fundamental distinction between complicit with—which is to say, contributing to (and only contributing to)—a certain wrong done by someone else and being yourself a principal or co-principal in committing that wrong [...] only co-principals can, strictly speaking, be said to “participate” in the wrong doing. Agents who are complicit do less than that. They contribute to (without participating as a co-principal in) wrongdoings committed by someone else. This distinction, clear though it seems, is often overlooked in discussions of the moral responsibility attached to complicity. Responsibility for a complicit action is often said, for example, to depend on the agent's *intentional participation* in a principal's wrongdoing; or complicity is said to occur when one contributes to wrongdoing in order for that wrong to be performed and to succeed in its purpose. [...] If we are looking for what is the minimum condition for your being complicit with another in his wrongful actions it is (a) not the intention to share in a joint action with him, still less (b) an intention to pursue a purpose that you share with him. It is in our view something much less, and quite different, in each case: (a') contributing to his wrongful actions, and doing so (b') knowing that you contribute to his doing wrong.²⁴

In the above comparison, Dr. Stockmann has no intention of joining those who promote the tainted baths, but he tacitly acknowledges the contrib-

utory power omission has to enable serious harms. Accordingly, Stockmann recognizes a positive duty to challenge those promoting the baths in order to avoid his passive complicity in wrongdoing. Support of this recognition can be derived from consequentialist considerations that place our acts and omissions on a moral par relevant to their consequential harms.²⁵ Likewise, I argue, the moral responsibility that derives from our commitment to public reason requires the active challenging of those who insist on making claims of purely rhetorical value in the public realm—including claims contrary to established scientific findings, as well as any inaccurate declarations that are clearly neglectful of noncontroversially identifiable facts.²⁶ To look the other way when specious statements are offered contributes to their public perpetuation and is contrary to one's commitment to reasonably informed public discourse.

When leading contenders for political office, such as former governor of Massachusetts and former presidential hopeful Mitt Romney, equivocate on serious issues such as anthropogenic climate change (because doing so is politically convenient), it makes them morally blameworthy with regard to serious ongoing harms global warming brings to bear on vulnerable populations.²⁷ Since harmful distortions of fact result from the influence of comprehensive and therefore ideologically laden doctrines, it follows that any blatant breach of public reason in political discourse is itself morally condemnable. This includes religious arguments not transparently translatable into public reason. As former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum stated while campaigning to be the 2012 Republican candidate for presidency:

One of the things I will talk about, that no president has talked about before, is I think the dangers of contraception in this country [...] the whole sexual libertine idea. Many of the Christian faith have said, well, that's okay, contraception is okay. It's not okay. It's a license to do things in a sexual realm that is counter to how things are supposed to be.²⁸

Such claims, when offered by public figures, are morally blameworthy in that they undermine reasonable public discourse by breaching the very epistemological limitations one must accept in order to engage in meaningful public discourse within a free pluralistic society. Hospitality to such statements, summoned in order to allow an ostensibly balanced field of opinions in the public realm, is actually corrosive to intelligent political discourse and thus harmful to society as a whole. In tolerating such speech acts without challenging them, we are silently complicit to the erosion of public discourse and informed political speech. When those who recognize the ideological impetus of such public breaches fail to publicly counter them (whether in the name of fairness, politeness, or aversion to controversy), they become morally accountable for tolerating irresponsible public speech—they are complicit in the harm of such speech insofar as they allow erroneous, unwarranted claims to go unchallenged. This accountability extends foremost to the press, which has an explicit obligation to inform the public through responsible news coverage. Insofar as journalists fail to challenge or correct the inaccurate statements of public figures, they are complicit in the harms of public misinformation.

One example of which the press sometimes falls short of their role in promoting informed public discourse is by embracing a flawed conception of balance regarding scientific matters relevant to public policy.²⁹ This misguided embrace of balance is used as justification in allowing blatantly false statements to be repeated without correction or challenge. Rather than balance, the ideal of neutrality commits one to presenting factual information that is independent of ideological values. A commitment to neutrality, essential to public reason, does not require the airing of opposing views instead of established facts. When, for example, a politician rejects the well-documented scientific consensus regarding anthropogenic global warming, ethical journalism ought to dictate a correction.³⁰ In repeating patently false political assertions without correction, journalists provide no more than a platform for politically motivated propaganda. By enabling politically motivated *arguments from repetition* (i.e., "talking points") to go unchecked, journalists embrace balance at the cost of an informed public. Similarly, when reputable climate scientists are invited to discuss climate change alongside nonscientists who deny the reality of global warming, appropriate journalistic neutrality is replaced by misleading, inappropriate, balance. It is unlikely that journalists wish to participate in climate denial rather than create programming entertaining enough to attract a large audience drawn to controversy. Nevertheless, by fetishizing balance over the fact-based neutrality of public reason, journalists contribute to the foreseeable harm of conveying misinformation to the public. Again, journalists do not have to participate in climate denialism in order to be complicit with climate denialism; they simply have to enable it through hospitality.

Assertions and arguments made in the public sphere that fall blatantly far afield from the standards of public reason ought therefore to be vigorously met, refuted when appropriate, and rejected for consideration in the realm of public-policy debate. The complicit hospitality to patently ideological misinformation in the public sphere is corrosive to public discourse. Therefore, such hospitality is not balanced and fair-minded, nor is it a necessary condition of free speech. Rather than an expression of civic fair-mindedness, such hospitality is more akin to the concept of bullshit famously introduced by Harry Frankfurt:

Someone who ceases to believe in the possibility of identifying certain statements as true and others as false can have only two alternatives. The first is to desist both from efforts to tell the truth and from efforts to deceive. This would mean refraining from making any assertion whatever about the facts. The second alternative is to continue making assertions that purport to describe the way things are but that cannot be anything except bullshit . . . bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about. Thus the production of bullshit is stimulated whenever a person's obligations or opportunities to speak about some topic are more extensive than his knowledge of the facts that are relevant to that topic. This discrepancy is common in public life, where people are frequently impelled—whether by their own propensities or by the demands of others—to speak extensively about matters of which they are to some degree ignorant.³¹

To be clear, in the context of my journalistic examples it is not the science

denying propagandist that is guilty of bullshit (more likely they are being willfully ignorant or straightforwardly deceptive). It is the journalistic atmosphere that promotes balance over reasoned neutrality, and the educated journalists who play along, that are responsible for bullshit. The danger of bullshit's prevalence in society, as Frankfurt recognizes, is that it undermines the influence of fact and the valuation and care for truth. This is because the bullshitter is not motivated by truth but by some other consideration—in this case, the appearance of balance. Bullshit provides "fertilized" soil for ideological propaganda, spin doctoring, and outright falsehoods to take hold in society and public discourse. In this sense, complicit hospitality with its fetishized "rhetoric of balance" is essentially bullshit in practice. It is in challenging breaches of public reason and the bullshit that encourages them that we free ourselves from the charge of complicit hospitality. By freeing ourselves from complicit hospitality, we realize the critical "duty to civility" necessary to maintain a high standard of reasoned public discourse.

The all-too-common demand among media outlets for a presentation of "all sides" is one condition for a public sphere rife with bullshit. The concept of balance in the public sphere is reduced to dogma when it is assumed that freedom of expression demands toleration of, and equal respect for, all points of view in public discourse. Where the media fails to appreciate public reason and exacerbate the spread of bullshit, the onus falls still more heavily on educators and those with any public reach to resist the practice of complicit hospitality.³² Admittedly, a difficult issue is raised, and an uncomfortable one, for those with greater access to the public sphere. It is fair to ask whether or not I mean to turn every educated person with greater public access into a perpetual fact-checker. I do not.

My argument does insist that those who are in a position to counter public misinformation (and not everyone is in such a position) ought to do so. It must be confessed that this is an unavoidable wide and somewhat unclear group of actors. It certainly includes many scientists, politicians, journalists, educators, and public intellectuals. It is not a requirement of my argument that they engage the public full time in order to combat misinformation. It is a consequence of my argument that they should not let a reasonable opportunity to do so pass them. I will address this issue more below. I also want to highlight the critical responsibility that most people reading this article will have by virtue of their analytic training (i.e., philosophers). I will turn to this group in my closing comments, but first it is important to address some anticipated objections to my position more directly.

PART 3

It is likely that the arguments now being made will raise concerns over censorship and possible encroachments against free speech. To insist that standards of public discourse and inquiry be critically defended against public violations is not to endorse suppression of speech. The cultivation and guarding of epistemological standards in public discourse is not only compatible with freedom of

expression, it is necessary for realizing its societal promise. Freedom of speech does not oblige the listener to silent and passive toleration of comprehensively ideological, ultimately unsupportable, assertions to factual inaccuracies or to logically incoherent rhetoric, which can play no role (assuming a free democratic society) in responsible public policy decisions. Too often, those who spout scientifically or historically debunked, publicly harmful nonsense hide behind the shield of free speech.

Perhaps no philosopher has articulated the vital moral role that free speech plays in opposition to what I have called complicit hospitality better than John Stuart Mill. In *On Liberty* (1859), Mill writes:

... the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: *if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error* [emphasis added].³³

It might appear on first read that Mill's emphasis on free speech is at odds with my insistence on adherence to public reason as a necessary component of morally agnostic critique in the public realm. Yet to insist that the principles of public reason be adhered to, and breaches of public reason be met with aggressive criticism, is not to support censorship. Those who hold views deeply entrenched in comprehensive doctrines, or otherwise at odds with reliable scientific consensus or historical facts, are free to spout comprehensively doctrinaire views. However, as I suggested above, affirmation of the right to free speech entails no implicit requirement to allow, accept, or ignore controversial comprehensive claims (i.e., claims of a religious or otherwise dubious metaphysical nature), to permit them legislative influence, or to extend hospitable toleration to them in the public sphere. Indeed, the separation of church and state as enshrined in the United States Constitution is at once consistent with the critical standards of public reason I endorse and protective of the freedoms of speech and press *because of* their critical necessity. Under the First Amendment, which reads as follows, all three principles are succinctly endorsed:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.³⁴

In order to achieve the full benefit of free speech, especially the collision of error with truth that Mill tells us will facilitate a more vivid understanding of truth, a great deal of inhospitality to nonsense and error *must* be championed in the public sphere. Consequently, the First Amendment, in fact, seeks to protect the reasonable means of inhospitality (i.e., freedom of the press, the right to assemble in protest, and to seek corrective action from elected officials) in addition to the freedom of speech. This implies that the press has a responsibility to resist amplifying political ideologues and to challenge and criticize such ideologues when they neglect facts. When it fails in this responsibility, the press becomes merely a constitutionally protected disseminator and amplifier

of partisan propaganda. The best justification for constitutional protection to the press is to protect the press in its obligation to *critically* investigate possible error as an essential part of its mandate to help sustain an informed public. To repeat: it is morally imperative for those who have greater access to the public, including but not limited to educators, journalists, politicians, and even clergy, to robustly ethically condemn all breaches of public reason in political discourse. Failure to do so does not respect freedom of conscience but instead enables oppression and intimidation.³⁵

Conversely, one might argue that my view is not strong enough considering the public harm I associate with breaches of public reason. Why shouldn't the obstinate denial of anthropogenic global warming, for instance, be legislated against? Any extended defense of free speech would go beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say, I take it as a starting point that prohibitive laws bear a significant burden of justification in otherwise free societies. While I am sympathetic in some regards to the legislative efforts of certain countries to outlaw hate speech, I do not ultimately endorse such efforts. The burden of justification necessary for such legislative efforts cannot be easily achieved consistent with other commitments (e.g., religious freedom, freedom of the press) essential to free societies.³⁶ The value of free speech is therefore assumed in my argument.

A concern already mentioned is that the ethical burden associated with my argument is too great to be practically applicable. It may seem that in embracing the position promoted above that we pledge ourselves to endless argumentation and fact-checking. Furthermore, it is not the case that all of us have equal access to the public sphere and a subsequent ability to influence the tone of public discourse. It is true that my argument requires a stronger than typical commitment to public engagement, which may seem burdensome. Yet this objection can be applied to any moral argument that challenges our normal course of behavior. It is not a requirement of our moral obligations that they be undemanding. Nor is it a requirement of the argument given here that we abandon all other activities to fulfill its command. To the degree that we do engage publicly, we have good reason to stick to the requirements of public reason. The critical engagement I argue for, as a necessary component of public reason, is not beyond the capacity of those already capable of recognizing the importance of public reason. Most of the professionals likely to be reading this article will have access to various literary, academic, and media outlets. Indeed, it is likely that those reading this article already utilize such outlets to different, but relevant, degrees of public engagement.

IN SUM

Hospitality finds its meaning in the sense that one ought to treat guests and, more generally, strangers in a friendly and welcoming way. Hospitality, then, seems to be of great value in a society marked by moral and cultural diversity, within which it is necessary for a variety of people (indeed, "moral strang-

To oppose complicit hospitality is not to reject friendliness or civility. Yet being hospitable to one set of tenets, in this case that of factually based inquiry and reasoned discourse, necessitates, in one's effort to free oneself from immoral complicity, being inhospitable to activities that directly undermine informed inquiry and reasoned public discourse. Any less than inhospitality toward actions corrosive to informed inquiry and public discourse is morally complicit and therefore morally culpable.

Claims made in the public sphere that confusedly blur the fact/value distinction and run contrary to accepted scientific consensus or established historical facts are corrosive to public debate and reasoned inquiry. It is in defense of reasoned public discourse that we ought to reject in our public discourse the spread of factual distortion, comprehensive demagoguery, and any commercially inspired rhetoric that is empty of reasoned justification. I have emphasized the need for journalists, politicians, and public educators to reject such hospitality and to be willing to speak out verbally and in print against such breaches of public reason.³⁸ We must go still further to assert the moral responsibility—which extends beyond any civic responsibility—to be inhospitable to the promotion of ideology in public discourse, religious or otherwise.

I turn finally, and with particular stress, to the moral task of philosophers to confront unsubstantiated factual claims and indefensible comprehensive value judgments in the public realm. As I have argued, the one property shared by all philosophy, *qua* philosophy, is a commitment to the reasoned justification of knowledge claims. Further, I argue that this is essentially a moral commitment, deriving from the philosopher's recognition that the interests of others are such that one ought not to force upon others one's views absent of reasoned justification. This is an ancient commitment dating back to the oldest writings in the Western canon. Early into Book I of *The Republic*, Plato provides literary framing suggestive of the stark divide between the philosopher's moral agnosticism and sophistic rhetoric, factual distortion, and even force:

Polemarchus said to me: I perceive, Socrates, that you and our companion are already on your way to the city.

You are not far wrong, I said.

But do you see, he rejoined, how many we are?

Of course.

And are you stronger than all these? For if not, you will have to remain where you are.

May there not be the alternative, I said, that we may persuade you to let us go?³⁹

The remainder of Plato's text involves a sustained exploration of why one ought to embrace virtue as opposed to violence and reason as opposed to force. The fact that an explanation must be given is already a performative affirmation of the moral commitment, conditional for a critical philosophy demanding reasons in opposition to rhetorical subterfuge and force.⁴⁰

The need for philosophy's moral stance arises from the recognition of human fallibility and the epistemological limitations to which human reason is subject, or what Rawls refers to collectively as the "burdens of judgment."⁴¹

What I identify as moral agnosticism arises from the same recognition of epistemological limits that informs both Rawls's public reason and Socratic critique generally. Moral agnosticism, by virtue of its critical acceptance of fallibility, engenders the dual philosophical responsibility of justification and, importantly, critique.

To insist on public reason is to accept the need to critique those forms of public discourse that fall short of it, i.e., to refrain from complicit hospitality. Furthermore, to require public reason in debates held in the public sphere is to commit oneself to the guidelines of public inquiry, which underlie public reason and inform reasoned critique. All of these ultimately derive from the burdens of judgment arrived at when one nondogmatically embraces one's epistemological limitations. Again, this is the Socratic embrace of fallibility that constitutes the fundamental moral position of philosophy itself, or moral agnosticism. The moral agnosticism of Socrates brings with it the responsibility, recognized by Socrates, to be inhospitable to sophistry. Likewise, it requires those of us who have embraced the philosophical life to be inhospitable to the sophisms of our own day (i.e., public demagoguery that fails to live up to the standards of public reason). If this seems like a large moral burden, it should be weighed against the still-greater burden of living with the consequences of unchecked pseudoscience, science denialism, and political demagoguery.

In a curious passage from *The Apology*, Socrates addresses those who have demanded his death and ventures a forecast of the future.

Those who will force you to give an account will be more numerous than heretofore; men whom I restrained, though you knew it not; and they will be harsher, in as much as they are younger, and you will be more annoyed. For if you think that by putting men to death you will prevent anyone from reproaching you because you do not act as you should, you are mistaken.⁴²

With Socrates, I maintain, it is not the task of the philosopher to be hospitable.

NOTES

1. By "public discourse" I mean discussions held in the public realm, often the political realm, in the course of legislative decision-making.

2. An example would be an argument against abortion that suggests women are likely to regret such decisions and, therefore, are better off without the option. Such an argument may not be convincing to many people, but it nevertheless avoids any straightforward comprehensive metaphysical assertions that prevent otherwise reasonable people from understanding and being able to consider the position.

3. The arguments in this article are Rawlsian-inspired to a large extent, but they are not intended to be a historical exegesis on Rawls's own philosophy regarding public reason.

4. My argument is influenced by Rawls, but it is not an argument I identify with Rawls's own writings.

5. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 216–20.

6. *Ibid.* In his discussion of public reason, Rawls famously outlines the methodological ideal, referenced above, for civilly negotiating conflicts between comprehensive doctrines at the level of public discourse. Specifically, matters of basic justice and constitutional structure must be negotiated within the neutral framing of public reason. In other words, arguments drawing upon private religious values ought to have no significant legislative traction in a free, pluralistic society. The proviso, as later specified, to this form of argumentative restriction is that comprehensive doctrines may be granted a place in public discourse if arguments derived from such doctrines

reasons absent of controversial metaphysical assumptions are thus potentially understandable, if not acceptable, to all reasonable citizens.

7. S. Lewandowsky, K. Oberauer, and G. E. Gignac, "NASA Faked the Moon Landing Therefore (Climate) Science is a Hoax: An Anatomy of The Motivated Rejection of Science," *Psychological Science* 24(5) (2013): 622–33.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 224 "... on matters of constitutional essentials and basic justice, the basic structure and its public policies are to be justifiable to all citizens, as the principle of political legitimacy requires. We add to this that in making these justifications we are to appeal only to presently accepted general beliefs and forms of reasoning found in common sense, and the methods and conclusions of science when these are not controversial. The liberal principle of legitimacy makes this most appropriate, if not the only, way to specify the guidelines of public inquiry."

9. See L. Torcello, "The Ethics of Inquiry, Scientific Belief, and Public Discourse," *Public Affairs Quarterly*, 25(3) (2011): 197–215. Specifically, statements that run contrary to established scientific consensus, if made in the public realm in the course of political discourse, ought to be condemned vigorously as pseudoskeptical pronouncements. By "pseudoskeptical," I mean claims made on the part of nonexperts that run contrary to established scientific consensus. I use the term *pseudoskeptical*, as opposed to *skeptical*, because in questioning established scientific consensus, which is a consensus already skeptically vetted by the scientific process, a layperson, by definition, will lack the scientific background for issuing a meaningful critique. The practice as well as the humoring of pseudoskepticism by public figures has a distorting effect on the public's understanding of science, which can be all too easily witnessed in the case of pseudoskepticism regarding anthropogenic climate change. Climate change pseudoskepticism is regularly advocated by politicians (who are usually conservative) in the industrial countries most responsible for global warming per capita.

Republican Senator James Inhofe of Oklahoma is a good example of how scientifically illiterate elected officials can misuse their public position to disseminate harmful misinformation and even slander against scientists; he has done so with little or no negative consequences to his own political career. Inhofe has recently published a book (with an openly ideologically conservative publishing house) on the matter titled *The Greatest Hoax: How the Global Warming Conspiracy Threatens Your Future*. A recent Pew Research poll shows conservatives in the United States are the most likely to doubt climate change. Interestingly, the poll focuses on the fact that most U.S. citizens believe that climate change is currently happening as opposed to "Tea Party" members. However, the important numbers are those regarding belief in the human cause of global warming. Although 64 percent of Democrats accept that global warming is happening because of human activity, only 32 percent of Republicans do and a meager 9 percent of Tea Party affiliates. In total, only 44 percent of U.S. citizens accept both that global warming is occurring and that human beings are causing it to occur (<http://www.people-press.org/2013/11/01/gop-deeply-divided-over-climate-change/>).

Two high-ranking world leaders (at the time of this writing) who have demonstrated overt pseudoskepticism regarding anthropogenic climate change are Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott. Harper has a long track record of obstructionism regarding the Kyoto Protocol and has in a session of the Canadian parliament openly stated that "Carbon Dioxide is not a pollutant." See Hansard, No. 010, Friday, October 11, 2002 (<http://www.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?DocId=521207&Language=E&Mode=1#SOB-303075>). Since Harper's rise to prime minister in 2006, the Harper government has been openly hostile to any suggestion that Canada live up to its Kyoto commitments. The conservative Australian politician Tony Abbott manages to equivocate on the issue of climate change while effortlessly disseminating pseudoskeptical tropes out of step with scientific consensus. In an interview on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's news program *Lateline*, Abbott dubiously asserted "... there are certainly some reputable scientists [...] who don't accept that the most important element in climate change, to the extent that it's occurring, is man-made carbon dioxide" (<http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2008/s2748161.htm>). Australia's Abbott also has a long track record of climate denial, as documented by Climate Communication Fellow for the Global Change Institute at the University of Queensland John Cook. More examples of Abbott's many pseudoskeptical claims are available on the website Skeptical Science: Getting Skeptical About Global Warming Skepticism "Science Misinformer: Tony Abbott" (http://www.skeptical-science.com/skeptic_Tony_Abbott.htm).

10. For an argument taking up the problem of Holocaust Denial and hate speech generally, see: Andrew Altman, "Freedom of Expression and Human Rights Law: The Case of Holocaust Denial," in *Speech and Harm: Controversies Over Free Speech*, eds. Ishani Maitra and Mary Kate McGowan (Oxford University Press, 2012), 24–49. Altman defends the permissive nature of the

United States' approach to jurisprudence, which generally upholds the view that freedom of expression extends to hate speech. In the same volume, an interesting argument that much hate speech is "covertly executive" (therefore constituting a norm-shaping act of discrimination) and so unworthy of protection under free speech is advanced by Mary Kate McGowan. See Mary Kate McGowan, "On 'Whites Only' Signs and Racist Hate Speech: Verbal Acts of Racial Discrimination," in *Speech and Harm*, pp. 121–47.

11. One clear example of this is found in the writings of David Barton. Barton is a self-styled historian who writes that the United States was founded as a Christian nation. Barton has created an organization called "WallBuilders," which is dedicated to asserting Christianity into American politics. Barton's ideas have been promoted by mainstream conservative politicians such as Newt Gingrich, Michele Bachmann, and Mike Huckabee. A promotional video for one of Barton's tours of the capital that bring together religious leaders and conservative members of congress for pseudohistorical briefings alleging that the United States was founded on Christian biblical teachings can be found at the following link. In the video, which includes endorsements from several conservative law makers, Todd Aiken (R-MI) and Walter B. Jones Jr. (R-NC) can be heard endorsing the view that the United States was founded on Christian principles (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CKr-4tgVrY&feature=player_embedded).

12. This includes the Treaty of Tripoli, the United States Constitution, the Virginia Bill on Religious Freedom, numerous correspondences among American founders, and not least of all, any understanding of the historical context of the Enlightenment.

13. This is especially the case among those who are uncertain of facts to begin with, and psychological findings support this claim. It is well understood, for instance, that the repetition of false claims makes it easier for listeners to subsequently mistake such claims as truth based. This is consistent with arguments made by McGowan regarding the norm-governing activity of hate-speech (McGowan 2012). For an example of psychological literature supporting this effect, see: Ian Maynard Begg, et al., "Dissociation of Processes in Belief: Source Recollection, Statement Familiarity, and the Illusion of Truth," *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 124(4)(1992): 446–58.

14. This is related to charges that political liberalism is itself ideologically comprehensive insofar as the political liberal must assume the values of liberalism (e.g., tolerance) crucial to political liberalism. I do not accept the entirety of this critique for reasons given above, but for a strong example of such an argument see: Robert B. Talisse, *Pluralism and Liberal Politics* (London: Routledge, 2012), 126–41, chapter 7.

15. See: L. Torcello, "Sophism and Moral Agnosticism, Or, How to Tell a Relativist from a Pluralist," *The Pluralist*, 6(2) (2011): 87–108 and L. Torcello, "Moral Agnosticism: An Ethics of Inquiry and Public Discourse," *Teaching Ethics*, 14(2) (2013): 3–16.

16. One might counter that very often arguments are grounded in comprehensive doctrines. This is indeed the case, but at some level whether or not the person making the argument is actually successful, she or he is attempting to offer, insofar as she speaks to those outside her comprehensive doctrine, reasons that could in principle convince those who do not share her comprehensive commitments.

17. This is essentially the guiding aspiration of Rawlsian public reason, which is predicated on what Rawls refers to as "the liberal principle of legitimacy." The liberal principle of legitimacy essentially states that insofar as governmental power is ever justified it is connected with constitutional principles that reasonable persons *qua* reasonable persons, regardless of their sectarian affiliations, could accept. See Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 137.

18. See Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 8–15.

19. *Ibid.*

20. L. Torcello, "Sophism and Moral Agnosticism, Or, How to Tell a Relativist from a Pluralist," *The Pluralist*, 6(2) (2011): 87–108.

21. Peter Singer, in *Practical Ethics*, has claimed that utilitarianism is the baseline minimal starting point of ethics. This is because, as Singer argues, in order to think ethically at all one first considers the interests of others as being *prima facie* of equal moral significance with one's own interests. If every ethically relevant being is worthy of equal moral consideration from a universal point of view, then the best ethical practices (*ceteris paribus*) are those that maximize the satisfaction of interests among beings capable of having interests. When the third edition of *Practical Ethics* was published, Singer was most sympathetic to preference utilitarianism but acknowledged the possibility of defending other ethical positions against it. Recently, Singer has become more sympathetic to classical (hedonistic) utilitarianism as presented by Henry Sidgwick (see his preface to *Practical Ethics*, 3rd edition, and with Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek, "The Objectivity of Ethics and the Unity of Practical Reason," *Ethics* 123(1)(2012): 9–31. For another minimal justification of ethics that comes to a significantly different conclusion, H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr. suggests that a liber-

tarian style "ethics of permission" is the minimal moral position one can best justify in a pluralistic world (see Engelhardt, *The Foundations of Bioethics* [Oxford University Press, 1996], 70–71). By way of a rejoinder to Engelhardt, the preference utilitarian can argue that libertarianism assumes that a world where individual interests are respected and maximized is preferable to the alternative (which is consistent with preference utilitarianism).

I should further note that preference utilitarianism may provide one of the most reasonable normative corollaries to moral agnosticism, though I am not prepared to defend such a claim at present. Suffice it to say that whether one subscribes to classical utilitarianism, preference utilitarianism, libertarian style "ethics of permission," or any other normative system, one must first of all provide one's justification for adopting said position. As such, one inevitably must begin as a moral agnostic; moral agnosticism therefore remains the baseline minimal starting point of philosophy and of ethics. Some will object that the intention to act ethically is distinct and independent from any intellectual justification. I maintain that regardless of one's subjective intentions, in order to achieve one's desired ends, one is forced into ethical behavior by the procedural framework and practical necessities that require one to provide justifications.

22. One source of such obligation can be derived from the concept of "negative responsibility." By negative responsibility I essentially mean the same as some utilitarian's (e.g., Peter Singer) when asserting that differences between "acts" and "omissions" are morally insignificant with regard to outcomes. See Singer, *Practical Ethics*. The assumption being made here is that one can be negatively responsible for failing, or omitting, to act in a way that prevents morally bad consequences from occurring when such consequences are reasonably foreseeable. Therefore, there is no obvious difference between acting in a way that promotes bad consequences and failing to act in a way that prevents foreseeably bad consequences. The principle of "negative responsibility" lends itself naturally to consequentialist systems of morality, but it is also compatible with virtue ethics insofar as our actions connect to character-related concerns for other morally relevant beings. See John Stuart Mill's discussion in *Utilitarianism, On Liberty, Essays on Bentham*, edited by Mary Warnock (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1962), 279–80.

23. See Henrick Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People* (New York: Dover Publications, 1999).

24. See Chiara Lepora and Robert E. Goodin, *On Complicity and Compromise* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 80–81.

25. For a work strongly challenging the "conventional moral wisdom" that our negative duties (e.g., not to harm) always override any positive duties (e.g., to do good), see: Robert Goodin, *Protecting the Vulnerable: A Reanalysis of Our Social Responsibilities* (University of Chicago Press, 1985).

26. I propose that the dogged doubt of scientific consensus by nonexperts constitutes an informal fallacy properly described as a fallacious appeal to skepticism, or pseudoskepticism. *Pseudoskepticism*, as I use the term, results from a cynical questioning of scientific consensus that maintains doubt against a preponderance of reasonable evidence. This is properly called "pseudoskepticism" because scientific consensus is only meaningfully arrived at out of a form of skeptical rigor inherent to the scientific process. Thus, even if the scientific consensus is mistaken, those who lack relevant scientific expertise are not in a position to reasonably challenge the consensus of those with such expertise. The challenging of scientific consensus by those lacking relevant scientific expertise is never epistemically warranted. The fallacy is of the following non sequitur form:

Doubt is a property of justified, and reasonable, skepticism

Layperson "A" doubts claim "X"

Therefore, layperson "A" is justified, and reasonable, in doubting claim "X"

Where the premise that claim "X" is doubted is insufficient to establish that claim "X" is justifiably doubted.

27. While speaking at the Consol Energy Center in Pittsburgh, Romney stated "My view is that we don't know what's causing climate change on this planet, and the idea of spending trillions and trillions of dollars to try to reduce CO₂ emissions is not the right course for us." See YouTube, "Romney Speaking at Consol Energy Center in Pittsburgh," uploaded October 28, 2011 (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmfoQZMzsh8>).

28. See Rick Santorum Wants to Fight the "Dangers of Contraception," uploaded February 15, 2012 (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBTLnO7FQM8>).

29. For an extended examination of reasons why replacing the ideal of journalistic "objectivity" with a commitment to Rawlsian Public Reason is appropriate in liberal societies, see C. Fox, "Public Reason, Objectivity, and Journalism in Liberal Democratic Societies," *Res Publica*, 19(3) (2013): 257–73.

30. See Naomi Oreskes, "The Scientific Consensus on Climate Change," *Science* 306(5702) (2004): 1686, and see, more recently, John Cook, et al., "Quantifying the Consensus on Anthro-

pogenic Global Warming in the Scientific Literature." *Environmental Research Letters* 8(2)(2013). doi:10.1088/1748-9326/8/2/024024.

31. See Harry Frankfurt, "On Bullshit" in *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 132–33.

32. One might counter that if a politician's constituents want that politician to evoke pseudoscientific and pseudoskeptical claims in justification of a particular policy vote supported by constituents, then the politician must do so as part of his or her duty to represent political constituents. I reject that the duty of political representation justifies harmful acts that are supported by the voting public. To assume otherwise opens the door to the institutionalization of racism and bigotry by popular demand. Nevertheless, my argument endorses the view that politicians have a duty to keep their constituents abreast of facts relevant to political policy and that politicians by virtue of their public platform have the potential to influence the views of their constituents with regard to matters of fact. Even if a politician were to vote in such a way as to ignore the seriousness of climate change, he or she ought to do so openly while acknowledging what the actual scientific consensus is on the matter.

33. See Mill, *On Liberty*, edited by Mary Warnock (pp. 142–43).

34. *The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States* (New York: Bantam Classics, 1998). Note that in referencing the First Amendment I am not suggesting that it fully captures the sense of public reason argued for in this paper. I am, however, suggesting that the First Amendment is consistent with the critical mandate of public reason that I defend in this paper and protects the means of public critical discourse.

35. For a relevant argument defending the role and need for a healthy culture of public intellectuals in modern society, see Massimo Pigliucci, "Debates on Science: The Rise of Think Tanks and the Decline of Public Intellectuals" in *Nonsense on Stilts: How to Tell Science from Bunk* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), chapter 5.

36. For a good example of a work, likely the most thorough to date, arguing in favor of legislative efforts to prohibit hate speech, see Jeremy Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2012).

37. I borrow this term from H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr., who uses it to describe the moral relationship between individuals of differing ethical and metaphysical commitments living together in a larger pluralistic society. See H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr., *The Foundations of Bioethics*, 2nd edition, (Oxford University Press, 1996).

38. The passing of *Citizen's United* in the United States, which ruled that the First Amendment prohibits federal limitations from being placed on corporate and union spending during elections, has made it more difficult to detect politically relevant sources of public misinformation. One argument against the ruling, consistent with Mill's arguments on free speech, is that the *Citizen's United* ruling contributes to the corrosion of free speech by preventing an informed rebuttal addressed to the source of a political claim. This is because the *Citizen's United* ruling makes it possible for donors to make political donations without transparent accountability for their claims. For a full and informative critique of the United States' Supreme Court ruling on this case see Ronald Dworkin, "The Decision That Threatens Democracy," *New York Review of Books* (<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/may/13/decision-threatens-democracy/?pagination=false>).

39. *Republic* 327C. Loeb Classical Library Revised Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930).

40. This position, I maintain, informs the Rawlsian principle of liberal legitimacy, which is the principle animating the necessity of Rawls's public reason.

Our exercise of political power is fully proper only when it is exercised in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which all citizens as free and equal may reasonably be expected to endorse in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to their common human reason. This is the liberal principle of legitimacy. [...] All questions arising in the legislature that concern or border on constitutional essentials, or basic questions of justice, should also be settled, so far as possible, by principles and ideals that can be similarly endorsed. Only a political conception of justice that all citizens might be reasonably expected to endorse can serve as a basis of public reason and justification. (Rawls 1993, p. 137)

41. *Ibid.*, 54–58.

42. *Apology* 39D. Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).