Penultimate Draft.

Moral Agnosticism:
An Ethics of Inquiry and Public Discourse

By

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Introduction

In the face of a social world marked increasingly by entrenched and incommensurable ideologies, it is imperative that we find feasible ways to address contentious issues collectively. If we accept the realities of moral pluralism, and indeed the inevitability of pluralism in a free society, then the need for both an intellectual and an ethical understanding of the nature of scientific inquiry and of public discourse about it is crucial. Anthropogenic global warming will be taken as a case in point here, but I want to begin with the Rawlsian conception of public reason, which is grounded in the recognition of moral pluralism. I begin with Rawlsian public reason, acknowledging the major challenge to it, in order to apply the concept to an ethics of inquiry and public discourse that at once demands an emphasis of scientific facts relevant to public moral and political discourse, and the need to refute science denialism unequivocally.

Public Reason

The notion of *public reason* was made famous by John Rawls. The concept is meant to be a useful guide in managing the tensions between incommensurable comprehensive doctrines in a society defined by moral pluralism. A *comprehensive doctrine* is any doctrinal framework that purports to explain reality from a metaphysically robust vantage point, and, in drawing from the explanatory framework, to prescribe a moral system to its adherents. In a society marked by the

pluralism of comprehensive doctrines, according to Rawls, questions of basic justice and political procedure that are discussed in the public sphere must be argued from the standpoint of public reason (Rawls 1993, 1999). To argue from public reason is to restrict one's public discourse to arguments that steer clear of metaphysically controversial assumptions; only in this way can they achieve any traction on otherwise incommensurable disagreements between differing communities.

For instance, according to the dictates of public reason, opponents of same-sex marriage -- rather than arguing from a religious framework -- must find an argument for banning same-sex marriage that all discussants could, in principle, consider and understand. They might, for example, argue that the federal government ought not endorse any content-laden definition of marriage, but should instead sanction legal contractual arrangements in the form of civil unions for both heterosexual and homosexual couples alike. (Torcello 2008) Such an argument might not be attractive to those who either want to ban or endorse same-sex marriage for comprehensive religious or philosophical reasons, but it is an argument that both sides ought to be able to understand and to engage with unambiguously at the level of public reason.

A vital aspect of public reason, worthy of emphasis, is that existing scientific consensus ought to be accepted and relied upon whenever it is relevant to the construction and interpretation of public debates. (Rawls 1993, Rawls 1999) I have argued elsewhere that public reason ought to be extended to every aspect of public debate, and not restricted to questions of basic justice (such as same-sex marriage, a woman's right to choose, or physician assisted suicide) or to political essentials (such as voting procedure, separation of powers, or campaign financing). (Torcello, 2011) All issues relevant to the public sphere, regardless of topic, ought to be seen as falling under the pervue of public reason. This is because any issue that is up for

public debate in a pluralistic society will lead inevitably to a clash between ideological positions; the inevitable conflict requires a willingness to approach differences from a metaphysically neutral position, if meaningful discourse is to take place.

To this end, Rawls' distinction between reason and rationality, which is at the conceptual heart of public reason, is crucially instructive. Our comprehensive doctrines are grounded in *rational* frameworks. Such frameworks generally begin with an initial metaphysical assumption, followed by a set of coherently inferred conclusions. For example, if one begins with the metaphysical assumption that "human life is inherently valuable," then one may draw a set of inferences and conclusions about how best to defend and support human lives. But we also recognize the fact that logical strength and validity are not of the same order as ontological surety, thus we can understand how rational people (or people able to draw out the logical conclusions of their initial assumptions) can and do come to disagree with one another, even while remaining equally coherent (vis-à-vis their initial starting points) but rationally incommensurable.

In contrast, *reason* arises from the recognition of epistemological fallibility. From the perspective of reason, we may appreciate the rationality or internal logical coherence of any number of irreconcilable doctrines. Yet when we recognize that no argument exists that other rational persons are compelled to accept by the sheer strength of its rational coherence, then we are faced with the necessity of public reason for the framing of meaningful public dialogue. Without the security of one transparently obvious and universally compelling comprehensive doctrine—which is, by definition, the state of modern pluralistic society—we require recourse to public reason in order to debate, deliberate, and decide upon matters of public importance.

Challenges to Public Reason

At this point, someone might counter that public reason is only justifiable on the above-named terms if one accepts the inevitability of moral pluralism. I maintain, with Rawls, that moral pluralism is a permanent feature of free and open inquiry, and therefor of any free and open society. There are good reasons to believe this is the case. First, we should consider our own, often severe epistemological limitations, which Rawls referred to as the *burdens of judgment*. The burdens of judgment include personal biases and prejudiced ideologies; the term refers to those background beliefs that affect our ability to filter information.[1] There also exist the epistemic limitations to which all human beings, qua human, are prone, such as fallacious inferences, misunderstandings, and in some cases access to incomplete and misrepresented forms of information. In short, we should consider the commonplace epistemological limitations that provide humans with ample cause to recognize our own fallibility.

In addition to these standard burdens of judgment, the very nature of logical inference provides evidence of pluralism's inevitability. A clear understanding of logical validity reveals that valid logical arguments have no necessary or fundamental relationship to reality (McKeon 1941, Salmon 2006). This is not necessarily a bad thing, for it provides the theoretical guarantee that people can disagree while remaining rational. Consequently, equally rational and coherent positions can be both valid and incommensurable.

Likewise, as articulated by the ancient skeptics through Agrippa's trilemma, every assertion is merely an unjustified assumption until an underlying justification can be provided, but every justification must also be justified, which results in an infinite regress of justifications. (Landesman and Meeks 2003) As such, philosophical or religious comprehensive doctrines are

only supportable after initial, circular assumptions of a first principle, if they are to be defended at all.[2]

Once one recognizes the inevitable fact of moral pluralism in free societies, the need to offer public reasons for our positions (i.e. justifications that all reasonable people can understand, and *in principle* accept, even if they do not) should be uncontroversial. Again, this is why Rawls' distinction between reason and rationality, as discussed at length in *Political Liberalism* (1993), is so beneficial for our ability to both comprehend and address the inevitable controversies that arise in pluralistic societies. Rawls shows the need for, and applicability of, our shared engagement with public reason. Following Rawls, a reasonable position is one that takes into consideration rational disagreement, and that accounts for such disagreement in public discourse. As a corollary, a reasonable person is one who accepts the epistemological limitations and uncertainties that ensure human fallibility. In doing so, the reasonable person (or position) assumes the underlying premise that our assertions must be reasonably justifiable if others should be expected to take them seriously and ultimately to accept them. Another way of stating this assumption is to say that coercion must be justified.

The astute critic might yet argue that given the assumption just described, public reason itself rests upon an ultimately unfounded postulation of liberal values. In essence, the claim that coercion requires justification is itself an undefended premise of comprehensive liberalism, which in turn props up the practice of public reason in public discourse and political dialogue, without any ultimate warrant.[3] This critique is fair, but it forces us to ask about the practicable alternatives to the liberal political framework. If one takes seriously the claim that moral pluralism is the inevitable result of open and free inquiry, then we must decide either to reason

together or to enter into potentially violent ideological disputes with no promise of a fruitful outcome.

Moreover, I would continue to answer our critic by noting that philosophy and liberalism share the assumption that coercion requires justification. As I have argued elsewhere, the transcendental moral proposition inherent to philosophy is the assumption that in order to convince or compel, we must explain. An integral characteristic of the culture of philosophy no less than that of the liberal framework is acknowledgment of the need to provide reasons for our positions and actions: coercion must have justification. If one argues against this proposition, then one demonstrates it; precisely by seeking to provide justification for one's opposition, one agrees to the premise one means to oppose. The very realization of this predicament should be enough to settle the matter philosophically, leaving only the alternatives of unreflective dogmatic repetition of the rhetoric of opposition, or violent and unjustified opposition. Those who favor these alternatives need read no further.

For those willing to accede that the alternatives to an assumption of public reason or an essentially liberal framework are not worth their cost, I continue with my argument that this transcendental assumption is fundamentally compatible with Rawls' *principle of liberal legitimacy* as articulated in *Political Liberalism*:

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 (Rawls, 1993, p. 137).

To accept this transcendental starting point is to enter the philosophical community or more broadly, to join what might properly be called the community of reasoners. The stark alternatives are brute force, deception, and sophistry.

Moral Agnosticism

The transcendental assumption that coercion requires justification is an essentially moral proposition, revealing an inherent morality in philosophy itself. As Peter Singer has pointed out in *Practical Ethics* (1993), the minimal moral position at the base of all ethical reasoning is recognition of the need to take the interests of others seriously. In other words, the recognition of the other, as a morally relevant being, is essential for morality and (as I argue) for philosophy and for political liberalism. Reckoning with this need has been one of the primary tasks and characteristics of philosophical and political modernity. I want to call the essentially moral proposition foundational to ethics and inherent to philosophy and political liberalism *moral agnosticism*. Moral agnosticism arises from the recognition of rational fallibility that makes metaphysical and moral plurality a permanent feature of free inquiry, and that therefore demands that our assertions and actions be rationally justifiable and reasonably warranted. In addition to undergirding political liberalism, moral agnosticism supports the primacy of reasoned inquiry and justification over appeals to brute force. In doing so, moral agnosticism reveals the essentially ethical nature of inquiry. Indeed, moral agnosticism calls for the existence of a normative ethics of inquiry and public discourse to negotiate controversial issues, and public legislation around such issues, in morally pluralistic societies.

Moral agnosticism allows for the acceptance of reasonable pluralism while avoiding relativism, because of its mandate to condemn ideological commitments that ignore the philosophical mandate to prioritize justification over coercion. Unlike relativism, which is by definition unable to condemn any position or behavior ultimately, moral agnosticism allows for the flourishing of potentially unlimited doctrines, even while maintaining recourse to the ability

to set a limit, precisely in the form of condemnation of unjustified coercive doctrines and behaviors.

The Ethics of Inquiry, Public Discourse, and Pseudoskepticism

The ethics of inquiry and public discourse that grows out of moral agnosticism recognizes that a commitment to inquiry is itself ethical, and that responsible inquiry has its own ethos of operation. The ethics of inquiry involves due diligence in evaluating facts and an openness to opposing points of view. However, such openness need not involve any sacrifice of epistemic or moral critique, or the ability to condemn fallacious points of view and unwarranted use of force. Inherent to a commitment to the ethics of inquiry and public discourse is willingness to accept the constraints of public reason. This of course requires circumspect care when dealing with contentious, (potentially) metaphysically grounded arguments (for example, about the ethics of abortion, euthanasia, or same-sex marriage). It also carries with it an epistemic and moral responsibility regarding all matters of scientific inquiry relevant to public policy and legislation. Just as one has an obligation to frame one's public discourse in metaphysically neutral ways that can be understood, if not endorsed, by all interlocutors, one has an obligation to stick with scientific consensus when such consensus exists.

It is imperative to adhere to scientific consensus because just as our metaphysical ideologies can inform and influence our interpretation of moral arguments, they can exert an influence on our understanding of science. The scientific process, properly understood and practiced, is characterized by its effort to protect inquiry from the threat of confirmation bias; science involves the transparent collaboration of a global community of skeptical investigators, committed to the presentation of data and evidence and its peer review. As such, the scientific process is particularly adept at identifying and neutralizing the influence of ideological bias. It

remains possible for one scientist or even a handful of scientists to be influenced ideologically, but it is not reasonable to believe that the entire global community of scientific researchers, pursuing the subjects of their expertise scientifically, can be ideologically unified in a way that poisons consensus with personal bias. Consequently, when it exists, we must affirm the scientific consensus in our endeavor to reason publicly. Public speech that does not adhere to scientific consensus is careless, and careless speech is dangerous.

Careless speech is particularly dangerous when it is articulated by public figures with greater access to and influence upon the public realm than the typical citizen. Such figures include politicians, journalists, celebrities, and usually to a much lesser degree, academics. Positions voiced by such figures are often taken with greater authority than other points of view. By virtue of greater access to the mechanisms of public dissemination, public figures have a greater potential for influence and harm. Former president of South Africa Thabo Mbeki provides a good example of a public figure responsible for harms associated with a failure to take responsibility for reasoned inquiry and public discourse seriously. Between 2000 and 2005, approximately 330,000 lives were lost to AIDS in South Africa, in a way directly traceable to the Mbeki regime's failure to institute a timely antiretroviral regime to combat HIV. Mbeki's refusal to offer antiretrovirals to South African citizens was based upon his denial to the scientific consensus regarding HIV and AIDS. Instead, the Mbeki regime advocated treating HIV with a combination of lemon juice and beetroot. (Chigwedere et al., 2008)

Another example of careless and potentially harmful science denialism is the erroneous belief that vaccinating children is more dangerous than failing to vaccinate children. Erroneous claims that vaccines and autism are causally linked, determinedly repeated by celebrities such as Jenny McCarthy and Jim Carrey, who have been given a host of popular venues to make their

positions exemplifies dangerously careless speech.[4] The American (as well as Australian, Canadian and European) public is now accustomed to the presence of celebrities like McCarthy and Carrey in high impact outlets, such as those provided by other celebrities, such as Larry King and Oprah Winfrey. These outlets are utilized regularly for the promotion of the erroneous, scientifically unsupported and counterfactual claim that vaccines cause autism. Yet while in reality there is no supportable link between vaccination and autism, there is a clearly and scientifically established link between a lack of vaccinations and a higher incidence of pertussis (whooping cough) and other avoidable illnesses that affect vulnerable children in society. Indeed, the unvaccinated children of parents too scared to immunize them are not the only ones to pay the high price for the misinformation, for the "herd immunity" achieved by the general population is undermined by the failure to vaccinate as well.[5]

Another clear case of pernicious and dangerous science denialism is the denial of climate change. In the United States, at the time of this writing, only about approximately 42% of the voting public recognizes that climate change is largely caused by human activity[6]. The moral significance of such ignorance is evidenced by the fact that the United States is the largest per capita producer of greenhouse gasses in the world. The greatest loss of life due to climate change will be felt by the poorest, least responsible, and least able to adapt peoples of the world. Therefore, erroneous thinking about climate change among the most influential nations of the world (especially the United States) is largely responsible for the lack of any significant response to climate change over the last 30 years. As a corollary, counterfactual claims about climate change publicly promoted by politicians and influential figures (such as journalists, educators, and celebrities) has contributed to one of the greatest collective moral failings of our lifetimes: the failure to take any meaningful collective steps to address climate change.

In a sad or perhaps an ironic twist based upon misunderstanding of scientific practice and its relation to the term itself, science denialism is often referred to as "skepticism." This is a serious misnomer. Legitimate science, as a necessary, inescapable part of the scientific process, involves a high degree of organized skepticism. Scientific progress occurs through a collective endeavor to disprove favored hypothesis, as well as the pursuit of methods designed to help guard against confirmation bias and the other epistemic hazards to which we are all prone as a normal part of the human condition. Clearly, individual exceptions and mistakes can be made, but collectively and over time, the standard pursuit of the scientific process, involves the search for just such mistakes, and their scrutiny with methodological rigor. This methodological rigor entails experimental research and its repetition, peer review, and ongoing assessments from the global scientific community through research replication and analysis. Once a consensus has been reached among professional scientists on a particular issue, we have arrived at a point where all attempts to skeptically challenge a favored hypothesis have resulted in the actual repeated confirmation of the hypothesis. This has been the case in recent memory regarding the facts that HIV causes AIDS, that childhood vaccination is safer for children than non-vaccination, and human activities cause the global warming responsible for climate change.

I have argued elsewhere, for reasons similar to those given above, that the denial of legitimate scientific consensus on the part of non-experts is to be appropriately labeled as *pseudoskepticism* rather than as *skepticism*. Pseudoskepticism as a category applies to science denialism, and as I will argue below, it calls for strong condemnation when encountered in the public realm.

One of the dangers of pseudoskepticism introduces into public discourse is its influence on what philosopher Philip Kitcher has identified as *epistemological and political asymmetries*.

Epistemological asymmetries result from the tendency people have to inflate the level of

evidential support available to their favored beliefs.[7] (Kitcher, 1997, 2001) Political asymmetries

result from the ideological prejudices that are specific to one's society and culture. Taken

together, such asymmetries tend to produce what I think might best be referred to as *rhetorical*

asymmetries. In order to better understand how these asymmetries play out in public discourse it

is useful to consider an example.

Given a divided political climate (such as the one that exists in the United States at the

time of this writing in the fall of 2012), strong ideological entrenchment leads to political

asymmetries that cause people to filter news and information with a particular ideological

framework, Epistemological asymmetries compound the problem by leading individuals to

overestimate the degree of confidence they should have in their own political and ideological

positions. Such an atmosphere advances the state of rhetorical asymmetry in public discourse.

Rhetorical asymmetry manifests in the context of political speech, which is often processed with

a lack of nuance and discrimination. Consider former Gov. Mitt Romney's equivocating

comments regarding climate change while on the campaign trail for the United States

Presidency:

Do I think the world's getting hotter? Yeah, I don't know that but I think that it is. I don't know if
it's mostly caused by humans... What I'm not willing to do is spend trillions of dollars on
something I don't know the answer to. (Liptak, 2011)

 In such an atmosphere, all but the most careful discussion of topics such as climate change tend

to reinforce ideologically entrenched beliefs regardless of the factual content of the discourse.

The Ethics of Belief

Since we live in a pluralistic society where citizens interact with those of differing ideological commitments and will often come to influence one another (both intentionally and unintentionally), citizens take on a collective responsibility to exercise critical thinking (or due diligence) in forming and communicating belief systems. One can justify such a conclusion with an appeal to W.K. Clifford's reasoning in the *Ethics of Belief* (1876) There, Clifford (like Descartes) argues that each belief a person has creates the template for similar beliefs to follow. This view seems extremely plausible when one considers how easily fallacious forms of reasoning, or patterns of thought, lend themselves to a multiplicity of erroneous conclusions. (Madigan, 1999) We take this to be the pedagogical justification for teaching logic and critical thinking to students.

A second, equally important element of Clifford's argument is the claim that citizens in a given society will influence each other, so that our personal beliefs predictably will have an impact on other people. One can accept these premises without committing oneself to the conclusion, favored by Clifford, that it is always wrong to hold a belief without appropriate justification. (Madigan, 1999) It is enough to admit that our beliefs carry with them a significant degree of moral hazard, and as such, that they warrant circumspection as well as analytical review.

Given the above considerations, it should be clear that the espousal of pseudoskeptical claims by public figures is a serious ethical problem warranting an ethics of inquiry and public discourse compatible with the condition of moral agnosticism. In conclusion, the following principles should apply:

A. Ethical obligations of inquiry extend to every voting citizen, as common citizens of a political body.

B. It is morally condemnable to put forward unwarranted public assertions contrary to scientific consensus (i.e. pseudoskeptical assertions) when such consensus is decisive for public policy and legislation.

C. It is imperative that educators, journalists, politicians, and all those with greater access to the public forum emphasize scientific consensus and condemn pseudoskeptical assertions factually and ethically without equivocation.

D. The application of public reason provides a model for avoiding pseudoskepticism in the public realm, and for critiquing it in the public realm.

Studies in the literature on cognition find that repeatedly emphasizing the scientific consensus on issues such as climate change is an effective means of combatting erroneous pseudoskeptical perceptions among the lay-public (Lewandowsky 2012). The ethics of inquiry and public discourse as formulated here entail a responsibility to critique unequivocally those claims that are clearly problematic and ideologically out of step with established facts and scientific consensus. In a pluralistic society marked by deep ideological divides, by the need to responsibly address collective problems, and by the concomitant need to accept scientific facts, there is no pedagogical room for contrived neutrality in our classrooms.

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[1] Recent work in cognitive science has increasingly illustrated the effects of ideological belief systems on our interpretation and understanding of science. For example, see Lewandowsky (forthcoming, 2013), Kahan, "Fixing The Communications Failure" (2010), Kahan "Who Fears The HPV Vaccine, Who Doesn't, and Why? An Experimental Study of the Mechanisms of Cultural Cognition" (2010, 2011) and Dunlap (2008).

[2] This ancient skeptical trope has been a challenge to philosophers since its first assertion. Examples of influential modern works that takes the problem of regress as a starting point in ethics include Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981) and H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr.'s *The Foundations of Bioethics* (1996).

[3] This is perhaps the strongest argument against liberal pluralism. See Talisse (2004) for its elaboration. I have argued elsewhere, as I maintain here, that the premise in question ("coercion requires justification") is a transcendental assumption necessary not only for liberalism but for philosophical discourse itself. See *Blinded* (2011).

[4] For a representative interview with Jenny McCarthy on the topic of autism and vaccines see her conversation with Time Magazine Science Editor Jeffery Kluger: http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1888718,00.html.

[5] Rates of illnesses such as pertussis (whooping cough) are 10 to 100 times lower in countries where high vaccination rates are maintained, as opposed to countries with a strong anti-vaccination movements. See Gangarosa, et al. (1998)

[6] Amazingly, this represents an improvement from only 32 percent the previous year. See Pew Research Data (2012) http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/10-15-12%20Global%20Warming%20Release.pdf.

[7] Kitcher concludes from the nature of these asymmetries that some scientific research is more likely to cause harm through public misunderstanding than the findings are worth. The example that Kitcher uses is research into race and intelligence. Kitcher concludes that some research should not be conducted at all, and that the democratic public should play a larger role in guiding research agendas (Kitcher 1997, 2001). For arguments that propose a greater role for scientists in explaining the factual meaning of their research to the public, while rejecting Kitcher's argument that some forms of research should be off-limits see (Aiken and Harbour 2010) and (Talisse and Aiken 2007).

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