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Democracy, Civility, and Semantic Descent

Abstract: In a well-functioning democracy, must citizens regard one another as political equals, despite ongoing disagreements about normatively significant questions of public policy. A conception of civility is needed to supply citizens with a common sense of the rules of political engagement. By adhering to the norms of civility, deeply divided citizens can still assure one another of their investment in democratic politics. Noting well-established difficulties with the very idea of civility, this essay raises a more fundamental problem. Any conception of civility faces the problem of semantic descent, the phenomenon by which second-order norms devolve into tools for conducting first-order disputes. The problem of incivility in politics thus is not simply that of designing a suitably inclusive view of what civility demands. It might be that political civility can be cultivated only by way of interactions that are themselves not at all political.

Keywords: democracy, disagreement, civility, partisanship, Quine, semantic descent

This essay identifies a difficulty at the core of the democratic ideal and then sketches a way of addressing it. Simply stated, the difficulty is that democracy needs a functional conception of civility, but no such conception is available. Slightly elaborated, the difficulty can be formulated as follows. A well-functioning democracy needs an active citizenry. Yet active democratic citizens are bound to disagree, often sharply, over important normative matters concerning public policy. In conducting political disagreements, citizens are required to acknowledge one another's political equality. Thus, insofar as democracy needs citizens to be active, it also needs a functional account of the *rules of political engagement* to govern citizens' disagreements. Call such an account a conception of *civility*. A conception of civility is necessary to supply the standpoint from which citizens nonetheless can recognize those with whom they disagree as their political equals. The difficulty is that, under normal democratic conditions, no conception of civility is viable.

To better sense the gravity of this difficulty, observe that civility serves the second-order function of establishing the discursive *framework* within which citizens are to conduct their disputes. Thus, despite our ongoing and deep political

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disagreements, we still may be able to regard our fellow citizens as our equal partners in democracy, provided that they reliably respect the norms of civility. Put otherwise, civility supplies a way for divided citizens to assure one another of their good-faith commitment to democracy. The second-order civility norms make it possible for democratic citizens to situate their first-order disagreements within a common conception of how such disagreements are to be managed. By conducting ourselves civilly, we express to rivals our recognition of their political equality while nonetheless maintaining our opposition of their views. Civility hence makes democracy possible among divided citizens.

A familiar kind of trouble emerges because, in establishing rules of political engagement, any conception of civility inevitably draws a border between acceptable and unacceptable modes of political expression, and this border itself has political upshots. As many critics have noted, popular conceptions of civility privilege the communicative styles of the socially advantaged, silence the voices of society's most vulnerable, unduly constrain the arena of political contestation, and thereby serve the status quo (Young 1996, 2003). According to critiques of this kind, ideals of civility typically function as a tool of preserving insufficiently democratic patterns of political engagement. Consequently, insisting that citizens engage civilly under real-world conditions is democratically degenerative.[1]

This paper raises the possibility that this trouble with civility is just the tip of the iceberg. To see what I mean, note that the critiques of civility I just mentioned have an empirical flavor. They contend that civility is counter-productive *given* prevailing conditions of inequality, marginalization, and exclusion (Sanders 1997). This suggests the possibility that a suitably inclusive conception of civility could succeed given more authentically democratic background conditions. The concern to be explored here is that the very idea of civility, though indispensable to democracy, is hopelessly fraught even under robustly democratic conditions, and that therefore no conception of civility can succeed. The reason this might be the case has to do with a phenomenon I call *semantic descent* (Talisse 2020). This is the tendency of second-order evaluative concepts to descend into the first order. When a conception of civility undergoes semantic descent, it shifts from serving as a guide to our argumentative conduct into merely another site of first-order disagreement. Under such conditions, civility becomes a matter of the *content* of one's first-order beliefs; similarly, the charge that one's interlocutor is being uncivil becomes just one more way of denigrating their position. Semantically descended norms of civility hence do not provide the normative stance from which citizens can express their respect for one another's equality despite their political disagreements; they instead serve as weapons for expelling political opponents from the arena of democratic discourse.

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1 See Jamieson et al. 2017 for a review.

This formulation of semantic descent is admittedly vague. It will be clarified below. The point at present is that if I am correct in thinking that democracy indeed needs a conception of civility and that any conception of civility is subject to semantic descent, some of the familiar dysfunctions of democratic discourse cannot be addressed by developing better conceptions of civility. Accordingly, this essay closes by describing a different prescriptive tack.

My argument proceeds in five steps. *First*, I will explain why democracy needs a functional conception of civility. Here, the claim is that in order for democratic citizens to adequately express a due regard for their fellow citizens' equality, they need a second-order conception of the norms of political disputation within which they can situate their first-order disagreements. *Second*, I will sketch a conception of civility that is suited to this purpose. Responding indirectly to familiar critiques of civility, I will show that, on the model I propose, civility is not a norm of politeness or de-escalation, but rather a mode of *public address* that recognizes the political equality of one's fellow citizens. *Third*, I will clarify the nature of the civic *duty* that corresponds to this conception of civility. *Fourth*, I will clarify the idea of semantic descent and show that any viable conception of civility is notably vulnerable to it. *Finally*, in the concluding Section I will draw out some prescriptive suggestions.

1 Why Democracy Needs Civility

We commonly think of democracy in institutional terms. We see it as a political order characterized by open elections for public offices, constitutional constraints, the rule of law, freedom of speech, an independent judiciary, and so on. This makes good sense, as these institutions loom large in our political lives.

However, a strictly institutional conception of democracy is flawed. For one thing, political institutions differ from one democratic society to the next. Voting procedures, representation schemes, conceptions of free speech, and judicial arrangements are not uniform across democracies. In some democratic countries, voting is legally required, and military service is mandatory. In others, they are voluntary. In some democracies, certain speech acts—such as denying that the Holocaust occurred—are criminal. In others, there are explicit protections against such restrictions. Some democracies use parliamentary modes of political representation, while others do not. Given the variation, how can these societies all be democracies?

This suggests that although certain institutional forms are characteristic of democracies, democracy itself should be identified with the *kind of society* those institutions aspire to realize. This allows there to be many distinct institutional forms that democracy can take.

An obvious question emerges. What kind of society is a democracy? Abraham Lincoln's famous depiction of democracy as government of the people, by the people, and for the people may seem a good start. But it goes only so far. A more complete view is that democracy is the aspiration for a social order governed by *all* the people. What's more, in a democracy, the people do not only rule themselves—they rule themselves as equal partners. No democratic citizen is another's political subordinate or overlord. In short, a democracy is a society in which people govern themselves as politically equal partners.

That's the ideal, anyway. Real-world democracies fall short of being societies of self-governing political equals. Hence it is worth emphasizing that democracy is the *aspiration* for achieving such a society. Real-world regimes, with all of their flaws, will count as democracies insofar as their political institutions and practices can plausibly be regarded as aimed at achieving the ideal.

To be clear, political equality does not mean that every citizen is to be regarded as identical or equally admirable. Rather, political equality means that each of us is able to participate in the activities of collective self-government *as an equal*. That is, in a democracy, citizens are regarded not as individuals who merely *get* an equal say in political decision-making; it is understood that citizens are *entitled* to an equal say. Crucially, this means that both our government and our fellow citizens must do more than simply *allow* us to exercise our political voice. They must recognize our political equality; thus, they also owe us a hearing (Goodin 2003, 178).

Lest this depiction suggest that democracy ideally is a placid style of politics, consider that as equals, we get to make up our own minds about political matters. We are not required to defer to others' judgement or acquiesce in another's say-so, even when others demonstrably know better than we do. Our equality entitles us to formulate our own views about political policies, candidates, and priorities. Within broad constraints, having poor political judgement or being uninformed about political matters does not disqualify one from citizenship. And even when our views are defeated at the polls, we nonetheless can stand our ground. We need not resign in the face of electoral defeat; we can continue making our case while opposing the prevailing democratic outcome. Indeed, a robust culture of political contestation, critique, and protest is a sign of the health of a democratic society.

Political disagreement is thus an inescapable feature of democratic society. What's more, political disagreement is frequently normatively *weighty* in that it is concerned with values and priorities that loom large in citizens' normative perspectives. When we disagree over public policy, we often are disagreeing over core political values like *freedom*, *respect*, *accountability*, and *dignity*. We typically take our views about, say, immigration, taxation, environmental policy, and gun ownership to reflect sound ideals of *justice*. Accordingly, when engaging their political disagreements, citizens are bound to see their opponents as not only *wrong*, but

in the wrong, and therefore perhaps deserving of reproach. Thus, in addition to disagreement, some degree of discord and animosity is part of the democratic package. This means that, although harmony and fraternity might be socially valuable, democratic citizens are never *required* to overcome their divisions, tranquilize their disputes, and hug it out. Citizens in good standing can remain political adversaries. After all, democracy is not all sweetness and light.

This image of democracy fits naturally with the broad tradition of *deliberative* democratic theory.[2] According to deliberative democracy, practices of discursive engagement and contestation among the citizenry are essential to the legitimation of political decisions. In other words, deliberative democrats hold that, for a collective decision to be legitimate, it must have been produced by processes that afford to citizens not only equal voting power, but also an equal chance to press their ideas, concerns, and arguments prior to voting. Votes are thus not expressions of citizens' raw preferences; rather, they reflect judgements formed by way of reason-responsive processes. According to the deliberative democrat, this reason-responsiveness is a necessary component of democratic legitimacy.

Yet idea that democracy is inevitably a mode of argumentative politics not unique to the deliberative conception. Setting aside minimalist views that hold that democracy is strictly a "kind of market" (Posner 2003, 166) where elites compete for political power by trying to win votes (Schumpeter 1942, 269), most conceptions of democracy in currency hold that the political equality of citizens entails that there will be ongoing political disagreements. According to many such views, citizens are generally encouraged to engage their political disputes. These disputes will need to be managed in ways that are consistent with the political equality of the disputants. Accordingly, even views that cast themselves in opposition to deliberative democracy must draw a distinction between permissible and impermissible modes of political contestation. For example, proponents of agonistic democracy like Chantal Mouffe see fit to distinguish between *agonism* and *antagonism*, and between political *adversaries* and political *enemies*. On Mouffe's view, democracy is an *agonistic* struggle among political *adversaries* rather than an antagonistic battle among enemies (2000, 102). Although she rejects deliberative democracy's contention that discursive engagement among citizens is necessary for democratic legitimacy, she nonetheless recognizes both that political disagreement is inevitable and that it must be conducted in ways that acknowledge the common democratic standing of the interlocutors.

There is much more to be said about the competing schools of contemporary democratic theory. My point thus far has been only that according to several

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2 See Bächtiger et al. 2018 for an overview of deliberative democratic theory.

conceptions, the inevitability of political disagreement among democratic citizens sets the problem of identifying how such disputes are to be conducted. Hence the need for a conception of civility. Once it is recognized that some measure of rancor and intransigence is inexorable in a democracy, it also becomes clear that there needs to be some standpoint from which citizens can express their regard for one another as political equals, despite their ongoing conflicts. The hope is that even though citizens tend to disagree sharply over policy issues, they could nevertheless embrace a set of *norms* of political disputation, a conception of the *rules of political engagement*. By adhering to those norms, citizens can assure one another that the depth of their political disagreements might not be all-encompassing; by conducting themselves according to democratic norms of argumentation, they could signal to one another their willingness to behave as fair-dealing democratic partners, despite their severe divisions. In other words, given that some degree of antagonism is essential, our view of democracy must include an account of *how democratic citizens should conduct themselves* when they are engaging their political disagreements.

A conception of civility thus is not a recipe for social consilience or comity; rather, it is a view of properly democratic contestation. It identifies the norms by which disputants should engage their disagreements it does not require citizens to quell them. Accordingly, a conception of civility also generates an informal idiom by which citizens can assess one another's argumentative engagement. It is by implicit appeal to a conception of civility that we charge a political interlocutor with erecting a strawman, promoting a false equivalence, cherry picking, or engaging in bothsiderism. To repeat, when properly deployed, such assessments are second order; they evaluate the interlocutor's *conduct* in disputation, not strictly the *content* of the views they hold. They are ways of commending or calling out an interlocutor's discursive performance, rather than forms of approving or disapproving of their positions.

In this way, the proposed view of civility differs from the familiar position advanced by Rawls. On Rawls's view, the duty of civility is the moral requirement to be able to explain one's political opinions regarding "fundamental questions" to one's fellow citizens in terms that invoke only the "political values of public reason"; the duty also involves the "willingness to listen" to one's fellow citizens fairmindedly (2005, 217). Accordingly, the Rawlsian conception of civility is tied explicitly to his doctrine of public reason and thus to his "principle of liberal legitimacy" (2005, 216). These Rawlsian commitments are topics of several ongoing debates that need not detain us here.[3] The crucial difference between the Rawlsian view and the

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3 For example, see Habermas 1995 and Rawls 1995, as well as Finlayson's 2019 excellent analysis of the 'Rawls-Habermas debate.' To get a sense of the broad range of the debates the Rawlsian view

position on offer is that the former sets a moral condition for the legitimate exercise of coercive political power, while the latter sets a moral requirement for decent democratic citizenship.

2 Civility as Public Address

The account developed above of the democratic function of a conception of civility offers guidance in thinking about what civility is. Specifically, two general upshots are worth emphasizing. First, the proposed view of the democratic function of civility entails that a conception of civility must be consistent with *real political disputation.* It must accommodate the depth and stakes of our differences. Civility properly conceived cannot require conciliation, consensus, politeness, or the willingness to meet opponents halfway. Similarly, it cannot relegate all expressions of animus, volatility, and rancor to the category of the uncivil. In other words, a viable conception of civility must allow for the possibility of one's being an *antagonistic yet civil* disputant. Second, the proposed account of civility's democratic function entails that a successful conception of civility must be *nonpartisan*. It must be *acceptable* across the spectrum of first-order political views that are available to democratic citizens; citizens *as such* must be able to embrace the proposed conception of civility.[4] To repeat, a conception of civility must be *second order*; the norms it proposes must not vindicate or dismiss any particular first-order political position that democratic citizens in good standing might embrace. Put differently, a viable conception of civility must permit the assessment that one's political *allies* are behaving in an uncivil manner; it must allow for the possibility that a citizen is being *uncivil* despite holding (what we regard as) the *correct* first-order view.

With these two points in place, it is clear that any conception of civility that requires dispassionate tones and a concessive political stance is nonviable. But it is also clear that, properly understood, civility is not centrally a matter of citizens' *demeanor* at all. Given its function of making available to political disputants the means to express and acknowledge each other's political equality, civility is centrally a matter of rendering oneself *accountable* to one's fellow citizens by allowing

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has provoked, see Macedo 1995, Young 2003, Gaus and Vallier 2009, Schwartzman 2011, Talisse 2014, Lister 2017, Watson and Hartley 2018, Leland 2019, and Vallier 2020.

4 This is not to say that a conception of civility must be agreeable to those who explicitly reject the ideal of a self-governing society of equals. Norms of civility govern disputes among citizens holding opposing views that are nonetheless within the spectrum of democratic opinion; those holding views that are beyond the democratic pale present a different problem from the one being discussed at present.

them to access the reasons, values, and priorities that drive one's political opinions and objections. When disputants engage in ways that permit such access, they may nonetheless remain in stark opposition, but each is better able to see where the other stands. Their mutual antagonism might not abate, but each can portray the other's position more accurately. They might yet regard one another as in the wrong and worthy of rebuke, but they will be better positioned to critique the position the other actually holds. In this way, civility serves as a means by which we can express our acknowledgement of our fellow citizens' political equality by supplying them with the tools necessary for them to be our more competent critics and opponents.

This recommends a view of civility as *public address*. Norms of civility are means for making *public* our political views in ways that are *addressed* to our fellow citizens *as* our political equals. Three requirements are central to this conception. First is *responsiveness*. In political discourse, citizens must strive to be *responsive* to their interlocutors' actually stated views and reasons, rather than with strawmen or other fabrications. Second is the requirement of *connection*. In political discourse, citizens must strive to address their contributions to one another, rather than to an onlooking audience of sympathetic co-partisans; in argumentative contexts, interlocutors must not use one another as mere props, foils against which to mug to their allies. Third, citizens must endeavor to conduct their political discourse by means of reasons and considerations that they sincerely believe that their interlocutors could appreciate the force of. To be clear, one can appreciate the force of a consideration without thereby taking it to be *decisive*; one can see another position as supported by reasons without thereby being *convinced* of their position. Call this the *mutuality* requirement for public address. Putting these together, we can say that, in democratic discursive contexts, we manifest a due recognition for our interlocutors' political equality when we strive address them in a way that is responsive to their actual views, connects with them directly, and attempts sincerely to offer reasons and considerations that they will recognize as such.

Democratic citizenship involves a standing requirement to duly acknowledge our fellow citizens as our political equals; therefore, citizens have a duty of civility. Now, notice that the requirements of public address have been formulated as duties to *strive* and *endeavor* to engage with one's fellow citizens in a particular way. The formulation as duties to *try* is necessary if we are to account for the fact that argumentative discourse is one of the ways in which citizens come to learn about their opposition's views. Consequently, civility as public address must be consistent with a certain degree of sincere misunderstanding of others' views. It should not count as uncivil when a citizen duly tries, but ultimately fails, to respond to an opponent's actual position. Borrowing a term proposed in a different context by

Christopher Eberle (2002, 104), we can say that the resulting duty of civility is a duty of *conscientious engagement*.

Before moving on, two merits of the public address conception of civility should be emphasized. First, on the public address account, incivility does not lie in tone, heat, or animus, but rather in opportunistic refusals to engage with the actual views of one's political opponents and critics. This enables us to identify popular modes of political discourse as especially uncivil. Note how often political argumentation involves strategic mischaracterization of the oppositions' actual views, the mere pantomime of answering objections while simply restating one's views for the sake of rallying one's allies, and the tactic of offering as decisive reasons in favor of one's view claims that are the very ones being called into question by one's critics.[5]

Second, the public address conception is able to accommodate the thought that especially intense levels of hostility and animosity are generally *regrettable* features of politics. After all, heat and attitude are tactics for *escalating* conflict, and when they are employed by those who are already unduly advantaged, they serve to diminish critics and smother criticisms. One could go so far as to say that the marks of incivility as popularly understood (aggression, name-calling, shouting, and the like) are reliable *signals* that civility in the sense of public address is being breached. What matters in assessing a mode of discourse with respect to civility, then, is how well the interlocutors succeed in actually addressing one another in the relevant ways. Heat, animosity, and tone are consistent with public address, even if they can be evidence of its violation. Consequently, citizens may have a *pro tanto* duty to be calm, polite, and cooperative, but this duty is parasitic on the duty to publicly address their fellow citizens. Thus, declining to be mannerly and composed does not necessarily breach the norms of citizenship.

Such is a bare sketch of civility as public address. A complete formulation lies beyond this essay's scope. But recall that my objective is not to defend my conception of civility, but rather to identify a problem that any conception of civility must confront. My contention at this juncture is simply that the conception of civility as public address is both attractive and arguably viable, given the purpose that a conception of civility is to serve in a democratic society.

3 Civility as a Reciprocal Duty

The idea that civility is a requirement governing citizens' discursive engagement entails that the duty of civility is intrinsically *reciprocal*.[6] That is, the duty of civility

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5 See Aikin and Talisse 2019 for discussion of these pathologies.
6 The following discussion draws from Aikin and Talisse 2020, ch 9.

holds only under the condition that one's fellow citizens tend to uphold the duty as well.

To explain: Consider that some duties are *first-personal*. An analogy with garden-variety moral virtue will be helpful. Consider a virtue like *moderation*. This virtue establishes a standard of conduct that requires of the individual temperance in the pursuit of enjoyment. This standard is *first-personal* in that what it requires is not contingent on the presence of other temperate people. The virtue of temperance applies to individuals as individuals, and demands of them individual moderation, even in the presence of immoderate company. Another example of a first-personal virtue is courage. The courageous person must stand firm in fearful situations, even in when surrounded by cowards. To be sure, precisely *what* course of action courage requires might depend on one's company and what they are currently doing; nonetheless, that others are cowards does not license anything less than courage from the courageous person. Again, courage, as a first-personal virtue, applies to the individual.

Contrast these first-personal virtues with requirements that are *reciprocal*. These do not primarily attach to individuals, but instead govern *groups* of individuals and are exhibited in relations between them. They establish a standard of conduct for *us* rather than simply for *me* and *you*. To take a simple example, take the playground norm, 'keep your hands to yourself.' The norm of keeping one's hands to oneself establishes a standard of conduct for *those on the playground*; more importantly, it is in virtue of its *collective application* that individuals are bound to comply with its requirements. When Billy violates the norm by grabbing Danny, and Danny retaliates, it would be absurd to criticize Danny for failing to keep his hands to himself. With Billy's violation, the collective norm is suspended, and in extricating himself by pushing Billy away, Danny does not himself *break* the rule. To better capture this, we can say that the rule 'keep your hands to yourself' is an abbreviated version of the more complex rule 'keep your hands to yourself on the condition that others are keeping their hands to themselves.' The duty is hence *reciprocal*; the standard of conduct applies to groups, and individuals are required to abide by the norm on the condition that others generally do so as well.

Notice that in this playground case, the norm does not indicate what one is permitted to do in response to its violation. Surely there are certain retaliatory acts that Danny could perform against Billy that would be inappropriate or even impermissible. That Billy's violation suspends the collective norm does not afford to Danny moral *carte blanche*. Though his retaliatory response does not itself constitute a violation of the 'keep your hands to yourself' norm, Danny may still retaliate in ways that are wrong.

Return to politics. Some civic duties are first-personal. For example, citizens have a duty to keep abreast of public affairs; that one's fellow citizens are uninformed and ignorant of public affairs does not suspend that duty. Similarly, as a citizen, one's engagements with others must manifest honesty. That one's fellow citizens are inveterate dissemblers does not license one to be dishonest. In fact, when dishonesty is rampant, honesty is all the more important.

Not all civic duties are first-personal. Some are reciprocal; they prescribe modes of conduct to us *collectively*, so to speak. Accordingly, individuals are required to abide by these requirements only when they are embraced and generally practiced by the group. Where a reciprocal duty is commonly disregarded within a group, the duty is rendered inactive.

The duty of civility is reciprocal. We are required to hold ourselves politically accountable to our fellow citizens, and hence to render ourselves vulnerable to their criticisms, as a way of manifesting our recognition of their status as equal partners in democratic self-government. Yet, when others are disposed to incivility, they decline to hold themselves politically accountable to us; under such conditions, it would be perverse to take ourselves to nonetheless be bound by the duty of civility in our engagements with them. Indeed, in abiding to the duty of civility when it is generally flouted, we render ourselves complicit in our own political subordination. One might say, then, that practicing civility under conditions where it is not reciprocated empowers and entrenches incivility, which in turn serves to further deteriorate democratic conditions. By fulfilling the duty of civility when dealing with the uncivil, we contribute to the strategic effectiveness of incivility.[7] This is not only imprudent; it also may be an instance of wrongdoing.

4 The Problem of Semantic Descent

The next step in the argument calls for some stage setting concerning a bit of nomenclature coined by W. V. O. Quine. Quine introduced the term *semantic ascent* in his theorizing about the structure of philosophical disagreements over what exists. Quine was concerned with whether disputes over the existence over nonphysical items as classes and numbers could be well-ordered. It would seem that between the physicalist (who denies that there are such items) and the non-physicalist (who affirms that some nonphysical items exist), there could be no proper engagement, as the argumentative maneuvers from the one side seem destined to appear question-begging to the other. Indeed, it seems that among these interlocutors, their

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7 Under certain extreme circumstances, there even may be a duty of incivility. See Delmas 2018 for a similar discussion in the context of the duty to obey the law.

disagreement is likely to extend to questions over what counts as a relevant consideration with respect to the dispute.

Quine gave the name *semantic ascent* to the strategy of dealing with disputes of this kind by shifting the site of the dispute, at least momentarily, towards the terms each side employs in formulating their position. According to Quine, in such cases interlocutors should try ascending from talking about the matter in dispute to talking about the way they talk about the matter in dispute. Quine writes that semantic ascent is "the shift from talking in certain terms to talking about them" (1960, 271). He reasons that, "Words … unlike [e.g.] classes … are tangible objects of the size so popular in the marketplace, where men of unlike conceptual schemes communicate at their best" (1960, 251). The strategy of semantic ascent, then, is that of looking for relatively uncontested common ground, in the hope that disputants might find there a foothold from which they can conduct their fundamental disagreements more productively (Azzouni 1998; Koslicki 2007).

Importantly, the strategy involves not simply a change in the topic of the disputants' conversation, but a shift in the *level* of the topic of the conversation. They are to shift from arguing about whether classes exist to talking about how they talk about whether classes exist. This *second-order* conversation will focus on hopefully more tractable questions such as what each takes to be adequate *definitions* or *conceptualizations* of the disputed item, what renders those definitions and conceptualizations adequate, and so on.

Again, the hope is that by semantically ascending, interlocutors might discover that there is enough difference in their nomenclature as to render their dispute over (e.g.) classes merely verbal. (In that case, they may nonetheless have to confront a prolonged debate at the semantic level.) Or they could discover that they are largely in agreement over the semantics, which itself might constitute a kind of progress in their first-order dispute about (e.g.) classes. Semantic ascent, then, is not a way to resolve disputes, but rather a means for making disputes more orderly.

The strategy fixes attention on a general fact about disagreements, namely that they run simultaneously along two evaluative tracks that may be distinguished, following Quine, by referring to *first-order* and *second-order* levels of evaluation. In this way, argumentative discourse functions a lot like communication more generally. In carrying on a conversation, communicators must simultaneously track at least two distinct levels of language use: the meanings of the words being uttered (the semantics, the first order) and the grammatical structure of their utterance (the syntax, the second order). Missteps in tracking either typically result in communicative failure. What's more, communicators need a second-order idiom to diagnose and correct certain kinds of communicative failure.

Similarly, in order to successfully engage in political disagreement, disputants must track and evaluate each other's claims (the first order) as well as their *discursive performance* (the second order). For example, when engaged in a disagreement about, say, gun ownership laws, disputants must be able to track one another's first-order claims about guns, ownership, and the law, while also attending to the ways in which those claims figure into the evolving dialectic among them. In other words, interlocutors must perpetually 'keep score' of the state of play in their dispute (Lewis 1979; McGowan 2019). Scorekeeping is a second-order evaluative site that is distinct from the first-order assessment of the reasons offered about gun ownership laws. Accordingly, just as an unsound argument can have a true conclusion, a logically impeccable first-order case for stricter gun laws can be a dialectical failure.

Minimally, then, in order to engage in proper argumentation, each interlocutor's contribution must take account of the relevant prior statements introduced into the discussion; they must avoid contradicting their own prior statements; they must not needlessly repeat claims that are already manifestly agreed upon; they must decline to repeatedly assert as a premise that which is disputed among them; they must sincerely attempt to provide reasons that the interlocutor could recognize as such; and so on. Importantly, overt refusal to conduct oneself in these ways is not only to fail at communication, it is also to treat one's interlocutor as less than an equal.

Now we can tie the threads together. As a conception of how to conduct disagreements with our fellow citizens, civility as public address has largely to do with what has just been called our *discursive performance*. We fail to be civil not in virtue of the position we hold, nor in virtue of the heat or tone with which we express our position, but centrally because of the ways in which our presentation of our position fails to duly address our interlocutors. To repeat, the duty of civility thus has to do with our dialectal conduct, not our first-order political beliefs. By engaging civilly, we can express to our political foes that we uphold the ideal of self-government among equals, despite the fact of our profound political division.

Here's the problem. In political disagreement, there are no analogues to Quine's 'tangible objects' that allow people 'of unlike conceptual schemes' to 'communicate at their best.' What goes up can come down, too. And our second-order idiom for evaluating each other's discursive conduct in political disputation is subject to *semantic descent*—the shift by which our second-order evaluative terms are conscripted into a combat role in our first-order battles.

To get the flavor of what I have in mind, consider a term used in talking about online discourse, 'troll.' This term entered into our vernacular as a way to identify a mode of online conduct that is objectionable in virtue of being provocative and haranguing simply for the sake of disrupting discussion threads. In this

original usage, being a 'troll' has little to do with one's substantive commitments; 'trolling' is the second-order phenomenon of engaging in a way designed to derail conversation. As a tactic for disruption, trolling typically involves violations of the requirements of responsiveness and connection, as identified above.

Once the term gained currency, however, it quickly was subjected to semantic descent. The term is now widely deployed as a term of abuse to characterize those with whom one disagrees over issues at the first order. 'Trolls' are simply one's political opponents, and 'trolling' is whatever trolls (so understood) do in articulating their views. Accordingly, the assessment that an ally is a 'troll' sounds contradictory.

Another example of semantic descent is the term 'fake news.' The term was introduced to describe a source that poses as journalistic, but in fact is not. The term thus initially denoted a second-order feature of various web sites, television programs, and print media that routinely deliberately misrepresented the ideas and actions of certain political actors, largely for the amusement of like-minded partisan groups. However, 'fake news' has since come to be used as a term to deride the *content* that is reported by a journalist. At its worst, 'fake news' is simply what one calls reportage that is favorable to one's political rivals or unfavorable to one's political allies. In this way, the term has descended from its second-order function into our first-order debates. In other words, it initially served an *umpiring* function, but is now just another player in the political game.

Next, consider the verb to 'politicize.' This term entered the vernacular as a way of identifying cases where political actors attempt to gain politically from a high-profile event (typically a tragedy) that arguably ought to stand above the fray of politics. But now the term is itself deployed as a means for gaining politically under circumstances of that kind. More specifically, the term functions as an accusation that one wields against one's opposition as a way to claim for oneself the political high ground by disparaging one's rivals as unscrupulous and opportunistic. But, of course, vying for the political high ground in the midst of a tragedy it itself unscrupulous and opportunistic. Once again, that the term has suffered semantic descent is evident from the fact that no one ever accuses one's political allies of politicizing.

Finally, take the verb to 'weaponize.' This term was introduced to call out cases where political actors seek to manipulate nonpartisan political institutions—the judiciary, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Center for Disease Control, or the Press—into serving strictly partisan ends. In its original meaning, to 'weaponize' is to breach required neutrality, to transform a nonpartisan institution into a partisan one. Today, however, the term is deployed to disparage an institution when it *fails* to serve one's partisan ends. Again, one never says of one's allies that they have weaponized an institution.

The trouble can be stated this way: A conception of civility gives rise to an informal idiom for evaluating discursive conduct. But that idiom is necessarily vulnerable to semantic descent. That is, although we need a conception of civility to guide us in conducting our political disagreements, it can always be opportunistically wielded as just another way of fighting out our first-order disagreements. When civility norms have descended, they function as terms of approval for those who express positions that we favor, and the charge of *incivility* expresses disapprobation at the first-order positions that we find objectionable.

The trouble grows more acute once we recall that civility norms are requirements to *try* to engage in ways that successfully address one's fellow citizens. This means that the question of whether a citizen is being civil in a particular dispute is largely a matter of our judgment: we must assess whether our interlocutor is *endeavoring* adequately to address us as an equal. A significant body of empirical literature demonstrates that evaluations of this kind are highly responsive to exogeneous factors (Talisse 2021, ch, 4). We are very likely to regard those with whom we disagree politically as ill-motivated, untrustworthy, unreliable, and incompetent. Accordingly, our assessments of their dialectical conduct will be responsive to our evaluations of their first-order views in ways that will lead us to assess our opponents as uncivil.[8]

Next, recall that the duty of civility is a reciprocal requirement. This means that individual citizens are bound by the requirement only provided that their interlocutors seem prepared to reciprocate. Once civility norms have descended from their second order function, we grow increasingly unable to regard our political rivals as disposed to reciprocate. We therefore take ourselves to not be bound by civility's norms. Crucially, our opposition reasons similarly. The result is democratically degenerative—a condition where citizens are able to interact civilly only with their co-partisans, and, with some justification, see those who are politically different as undeserving of civility, because unwilling or unable to reciprocate. Put bluntly, when norms of civility semantically descend, we are left with the thought that only those with whom we agree are properly our fellow citizens. That's a profoundly anti-democratic stance.

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8 Our assessments of political behavior are especially driven by perceptions of partisanship. For example, Claassen and Ensley 2016 shows that we are inclined to view a case in which our political allies steal the opposition campaign signs off of neighbors' lawns as a meritorious act of realpolitik, while we condemn that same behavior when performed against our favored candidates by our partisan foes. See also Darby and Branscombe 2012 for discussion of data concerning the ways in which perceptions of fairness and attributions of responsibility are tied to group membership.

5 Conclusions

According to recent data from the Pew Research Center, citizens across the political spectrum agree that politics has become too toxic; they say they want a more cooperative and civil mode of politics; however, they also see their political opponents as the sole source of incivility, and want the other side simply to simply concede (Pew 2019). It seems that in calling for greater civility, citizens in fact long for a politics in which their opposition has been shut down, deracinated, and overcome.

This collection of disturbing attitudes is precisely what we should expect when civility has semantically descended, when its second-order content has been degraded to the point where it can no longer serve as a basis for evaluation of political interlocutors' discursive conduct. The crucial point, though, is that no conception of civility can be insulated from semantic descent. Indeed, as civility norms are reciprocal duties to try, the phenomenon may be inevitable. And observe further that civility norms are subject to semantic descent *precisely* in the cases where our political disagreements are intense; as these are contexts where we are most inclined to see our opponents as ill-motivated and untrustworthy, civility norms are prone to semantic descent precisely in the circumstances where we need them most.

Still, in order to flourish, a democratic society needs a normative perspective from which politically divided citizens can regard one another as political equals. The upshot of the foregoing argument is that no conception of civility will be able to supply this perspective. The intensity of our first-order divides and partisanship renders any such conception prone to accelerated semantic descent, and the call for more civility is likely to strike citizens as just another partisan pitch.

Where does this leave us? Before proposing an admittedly counterintuitive prescription, I think a general upshot of the argument must be punctuated. The problem of semantic descent is *internal* to democracy. The problem emerges when—perhaps *because*—citizens are striving to fulfill their civic responsibilities. Were citizens less invested in politics, the problem would subside. This is of course not to suggest that citizens *should* divest from politics; democracy indeed needs an active citizenry. The point rather is that the response to the problem cannot be to devise new and arguably improved conceptions of civility. The problem, after all, does not lie with the *content* of our conception of civility. It lies rather with the ways in which our partisan divides have so consumed our social lives that there's no space available for a civic perspective within which we can conceptualize our political disagreements as disputes *among* equals (Mason 2018; Talisse 2021).

Now for the counterintuitive proposal. The problem of civility and semantic descent has to do with the extent to which we are inclined to regard *everything* as an act of first-order political engagement. Perhaps, then, the problem calls for a

response that is *nonpolitical.* I realize that the very idea of a nonpolitical response to a political problem occasions the reply that any purported nonpolitical intervention is in fact just another political ploy. However, the readiness of this reply might instead be seen as a symptom of the problem. The slogan 'everything is political' is more popular than elucidatory, as it elicits the immediate self-reflexive query: is affirming that 'everything is political' *itself* just another act of politics (Talisse 2019, 28)?

In any case, the prescriptive suggestion draws on the idea that if the problem lies with the fact that our partisan divides have taken on an exaggerated scope, the response must lie outside of politics as we practice it. To be clear, the thought is not that we need to do more to 'reach across the aisle' and 'heal divisions'—these endeavors overtly keep politics at the center. The idea rather is that if politics affords no standpoint from which we can regard one another as political equals, we must try to construct such a standpoint outside of politics. In other words, we must devise channels by which citizens can see beyond their partisan identities, sites for cooperative activities among citizens where they do not so much suppress their political affiliations as render them irrelevant from the perspective of the endeavor at hand.

Such activities would be joint endeavors where participants are unaware of each other's partisan affiliation, because politics is simply beside the point of the undertaking. While engaged in such activities, citizens could witness each other's virtues in a context that disrupts the tendency to associate virtues only with our political allies (and vices with our partisan foes). The hope is that these quite different sites could supply a basis for regarding others as our political equals once we return to politics. As paradoxical as it might sound, it might be that our capacity for civility can be rehabilitated only in spaces that are not themselves civic. This suggests that the health of democracy might depend in part on establishing reminders of the fact that we cannot live well together by politics alone.

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