

Getting Our Minds Out of the Gutter: Fallacies that Foul Our Discourse (and Virtues that Clean it Up)

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We humans aren't very nice to each other – especially when we discuss controversial topics. We speak too quickly and too loudly. We don't listen. We're unfair. We put our own views in the best light, and our dissenters' views in the worst. These tendencies are extremely common, and they transcend economic, religious, and political boundaries. If you doubt this, ask yourself whether the people on "the other side" of your favorite controversial issue are always reasonable and fair-minded. You may well think they aren't. Perhaps *they* are the ones ruining the discussion. But of course *they* probably think similar thoughts about the people on *your* side. This suggests that most of us think that humans treat each other poorly when we discuss controversial issues. Those most familiar with our public discourse share this impression. In a recent article on the state of political discourse, *New York Times* writer Andrew Rosenthal quips, "There's lots of evidence that the national conversation is near the ocean floor."¹

Of course, one doesn't have to be a journalist or a scholar to know that something's wrong. Show a child a typical political attack ad, and she'll probably sense that something's amiss. In short, our discourse is broken. It has been broken by our unfortunate tendency to mistreat each other when we disagree. What's to be done about it?

Nothing, one might say. Civil discourse is sick, and no one can single-handedly cure it. We can't force others to think and speak fairly, or humbly, or charitably. Nevertheless, there is a way forward. We can take steps to inculcate in ourselves the kinds of mental habits that facilitate

healthy discourse. This chapter offers guidance for those wishing to take such steps.²

In the first two sections, we identify and explain two fallacious patterns of thought that commonly plague controversial discussions: *assailment-by-entailment* (Section 1) and the *attitude-to-agent fallacy* (Section 2). In effect, these sections diagnose two “diseases” of public discourse. Section 3 offers suggestions for curing these ills. We argue that part of the cure is to be found in the intellectual virtues. In particular, the virtues of intellectual *charity* and *humility* can inoculate the mind against the fallacies discussed in Sections 1 and 2. The chapter closes with suggested guidelines for putting these virtues into action.

One caveat before we begin. Over the course of this chapter we will discuss several forbidden dinner-table topics, including abortion, God, and morality. These notoriously difficult and divisive issues often make people uncomfortable. No doubt, many readers have found that discussion of these topics often leads only to hostility and polarization. And we can imagine a reader having a view on one of these issues and wondering whether his or her view will be treated fairly in what follows. If this describes you, rest easy. We won’t be defending a view on any of the controversial topics we discuss. Indeed, we won’t enter into the relevant arguments in any substantive way. Our primary focus isn’t the issues themselves. Rather, it is the question, *How might discussion of controversial issues become more charitable and productive?* Our answer is that avoiding the fallacies we describe below is, if nothing else, a step in the right direction.

1 Assailment-by-entailment

In this section we draw attention to a common but mistaken pattern of thinking. We call it *assailment-by-entailment*. We introduce this fallacy through a dialogue that, though artificially simple, accurately represents actual patterns of thought. In the exchange below, Frank and Judith disagree over the moral status of abortion. As is often the case in real disagreements, *unstated* beliefs play an important role. Frank brings two important beliefs to the discussion. He believes that *abortion is morally wrong* – and says so. But he also holds the following unstated belief: *If abortion is morally permissible then it is permissible to murder an innocent person*. Judith also brings two beliefs to the discussion. She believes that *abortion is morally permissible* – and says so. But she also holds the following unstated belief: *If abortion is morally wrong then it is permissible to curtail the rights of women*. Notice that in each case, the unstated belief

is belief in a *conditional* – that is, a claim about the connection between two *other* claims. More specifically, conditional claims look like this: *If claim #1 is true then claim #2 must also be true*. It will be convenient to use the letters “P” and “Q” as generic placeholders for these other claims. Thus, a conditional is a claim of the form *If P then Q*, or alternatively, *P entails Q*, where “P” is called the *if-clause* of the conditional and “Q” is called the *then-clause*. We will use these terms later. Now consider the following exchange:

Frank: Hey Judith, what’s your take on abortion? Don’t you agree that abortion on demand is morally wrong?

Judith: Actually, no. I think that abortion is morally permissible.

Frank: What!? I couldn’t disagree more. I just can’t believe – like you do – that it’s okay to murder an innocent person!

Judith: Whoa – who said I believe *that*? Besides, I just can’t believe – like you do – that it’s okay to curtail the rights of women!

What’s going on here? In their opening statements, Frank and Judith discover that they disagree over the moral status of abortion. But notice what happens next. In the last two statements, we find *belief attributions*. In each statement, a belief is attributed to the other person. Frank attributes to Judith the belief that it’s permissible to murder an innocent person. Judith, in turn, attributes to Frank the belief that it’s permissible to curtail the rights of women. Moreover, in each case the attributed belief is a *repugnant* one – that is, a belief that is extremely distasteful or offensive.

Why do Frank and Judith make these belief attributions? Because of their unstated beliefs. Frank’s unstated belief is the following conditional: *If abortion is morally permissible then it is permissible to murder an innocent person*. He discovers that Judith believes the conditional’s if-clause, that *abortion is morally permissible*. He then accuses her of believing something particularly repugnant – the conditional’s then-clause, that *it is permissible to murder an innocent person*. But clearly Frank errs in making this attribution. He has no evidence that Judith shares his belief in the above conditional. Thus, his belief attribution – his accusation that Judith believes the conditional’s then-clause – is unwarranted. And, of course, Judith makes the same kind of mistake. She has an unstated belief in a conditional claim. She learns that Frank believes the conditional’s if-clause. She then accuses him of believing something particularly repugnant – the conditional’s then-clause, that *it is permissible to curtail the rights of women*. But she has no evidence that Frank believes the conditional. So her belief attribution is also unwarranted.

We call this mistaken pattern of thinking *assailment-by-entailment*. The “entailment” is found inside the conditional claim, the claim of the form “*P entails Q*”. The “assailment” consists in one person’s attributing a repugnant belief to another person, thus, in effect, censuring them. It will be convenient to have generic names for these two people. So – with apologies to namesakes – let’s use “Abe” as a name for anyone who commits *assailment-by-entailment* and “Vic” for Abe’s unfortunate victim. Using these names, we can now describe the general features of the fallacy. Abe believes *P entails Q*, where *Q* is an especially repugnant thing to believe. He then discovers that Vic believes *P*, but lacks sufficient reason to think that Vic believes *P entails Q*. Nevertheless, Abe attributes to Vic the belief that *Q*.

Let’s now reflect on what is generally *wrong* with *assailment-by-entailment*. As the examples illustrate, Abe attributes an especially repugnant belief to Vic. The attribution, however, is unjustified. That is, Abe lacks sufficient evidence for thinking that Vic *holds* the repugnant belief. Notice that Vic, may, in fact, hold the belief; the problem is that Abe has no grounds for *thinking* that Vic does. In fact, in some cases, Abe has evidence that Vic actually *rejects* the repugnant belief. Often this evidence comes in the form of Vic’s explicit and emphatic rejection of the belief in question.

Most generally, *assailment-by-entailment* is a fallacy of insufficient evidence. In this respect, it is similar to many other informal fallacies. What makes *assailment-by-entailment* interesting, however, is that it conflates logical entailment with belief attribution. In short, Abe conflates *what he takes Vic’s beliefs to entail* with *what he takes Vic to believe*. To unpack this, let us reconstruct Abe’s thinking as proceeding along the following lines:

1. Vic believes *P*.
2. If *P* is true then *Q* is true.
3. So Vic must believe *Q*.

Suppose Abe is right in accepting (1) – Vic does believe *P*. And suppose Abe is right that *P entails Q*; that is, (2) is true. Abe nevertheless errs in moving to the belief attribution represented by (3). That is, Abe errs in moving from (1) and (2) to (3). In other words, even if Abe is correct in believing (1) and (2), it doesn’t follow that (3) is true, much less that Abe is justified in believing (3). To see this, keep in mind that there are different cognitive attitudes one can have towards a claim: one can believe it (affirm), disbelieve it (deny), or suspend judgment about it

(neither affirm nor deny). Suspending judgment is the cognitive equivalent of shrugging your shoulders. Now, to see that Abe's move from (1) and (2) to (3) is a mistake, suppose for the sake of argument that Abe is correct in thinking that *Vic believes P*, and moreover, is correct in thinking that *P entails Q*. Suppose, that is, that (1) and (2) are true. Nevertheless, any of the following could still be the case:

- Vic believes *P* but doesn't have *any* attitude towards *Q*; the content of *Q* has never crossed his mind.
- Vic believes *P* but doesn't have *any* attitude about the *connection* between *P* and *Q*; although he believes *P* and has thought about *Q*, he has never thought about whether *P entails Q*.
- Vic believes *P* but *suspends judgment* on *Q*; he has thought about whether *Q* is true but can't make up his mind.
- Vic believes *P* but *suspends judgment* on whether *P entails Q*; he can't make up his mind about whether or not the entailment holds.
- Vic believes *P* but *denies* *Q*; he understands *Q* and thinks that *Q* is false.
- Vic believes *P* but *denies* that *P entails Q*; he understands both *P* and *Q*, but denies that the entailment holds.

In each case, Vic believes *P* but does not believe *P entails Q*. Because of this, the fact that (1) and (2) are true is consistent with any number of scenarios in which (3) is false. Thus, Abe errs in moving from (1) and (2) – where the latter is a claim about *what Abe thinks Vic's belief entails* – to (3), *what Abe thinks Vic must believe*. Put differently, Abe mistakenly draws a conclusion about *what Vic must believe* from *what he (Abe) thinks Vic's belief entails*. Abe knows that Vic believes *P*; but because Abe lacks good reasons for thinking that Vic *also believes* that *P entails Q*, Abe errs in assuming that Vic believes *Q*. Lacking such reasons, Abe's belief attribution ((3) above) is unjustified.

This mistake is part of what goes wrong in assailment-by-entailment. There is more, however. There is also a failure of *intellectual charity*. As a provisional way to put this, Abe fails to treat Vic as Abe himself would want to be treated. Because of this, assailment-by-entailment is not only erroneous but incendiary. To explain this, it will be useful to briefly say something about the notion of intellectual charity.

Intellectual charity is one of many intellectual virtues. In general terms, intellectual virtues are *habits* of a well-functioning mind, dispositions that make for cognitive excellence. In addition to intellectual charity, such mental habits include humility, honesty, firmness,

courage, and open-mindedness.³ In general, charity involves love for others. However, a charitable person isn't someone who only *occasionally* manages to love other people. Rather, a charitable person has the *habit* or *disposition* to do so. More specifically, a charitable person is disposed both to desire the good for others and to think as well of them as she reasonably can. When applied to an intellectual activity, such as reading or discussion, charity becomes *intellectual charity*. Thus, a person who is intellectually charitable is disposed both to desire intellectual goods for others and to attribute as much intelligence and good will to them as she reasonably can.

We can now see how assailment-by-entailment involves a failure of intellectual charity. Consider the exchange between Frank and Judith over the morality of abortion. In virtue of their respective accusations, both parties fail to manifest intellectual charity.

For his part, Frank attributes to Judith the belief that it is permissible to murder an innocent person. But surely this attribution is uncharitable. The attributed belief – that it is permissible to murder an innocent person – is extremely implausible and morally outrageous. Thus, in attributing that belief to Judith, Frank fails to think as well of her as he reasonably can. After all, an alternative interpretation of Judith's position is readily available: she doesn't believe the conditional claim that Frank believes, namely, that *if abortion is morally permissible then it is permissible to murder an innocent person*. Thus, while Judith believes that abortion is morally permissible, she (of course!) *doesn't* believe that it is permissible to murder an innocent person. To be sure, Frank can still disagree with Judith. Indeed, Frank might think that Judith has made a mistake – even a terrible one – in failing to believe that abortion entails murder. But inasmuch as intelligent, good-willed people can disagree about that entailment relation (i.e., the conditional claim), Frank can attribute intelligence and good will to Judith even while thinking that she has made a mistake in not seeing things his way. In this case, it's more charitable for Frank to think Judith has made a mistake – even a terrible one – than to attribute to her the belief that it is permissible to murder an innocent person. The latter belief is deeply offensive – especially in Frank's eyes – and, in any case, Judith can reasonably deny that she holds it. In sum, in refraining from attributing the repugnant belief to Judith, Frank acts in step with charity without acting out of step with his evidence (about Judith or the abortion issue).

Of course, for exactly similar reasons, Judith fails to treat Frank charitably. Judith attributes to him the belief that it is permissible to curtail women's rights. But, again, this attribution is uncharitable. That belief

is extremely implausible and morally outrageous – especially in Judith’s eyes. Thus, in attributing that belief to Frank, Judith fails to think as well of him as she reasonably can. After all, an alternative interpretation of Frank’s position is also available: He doesn’t believe the conditional that Judith believes, that *if abortion is morally wrong then it is permissible to curtail the rights of women*. Thus, while Frank believes that abortion is morally wrong, he (of course!) *doesn’t* believe that it is permissible to curtail women’s rights. And so on. For Judith, acting in step with charity would involve refraining from the belief attribution; moreover, she can do so without acting out of step with her evidence.

Let’s take stock. Assailment-by-entailment involves the unjustified and uncharitable attribution of a repugnant belief. Abe accuses Vic of believing something repugnant and Abe does so because he thinks that one of Vic’s declared beliefs entails the repugnant one. Unfortunately, this attribution is both erroneous and uncharitable. It is erroneous for two reasons. First, it is based on insufficient evidence: Abe lacks good reasons for thinking that Vic holds the repugnant belief. And second, it conflates logical entailment with belief attribution: Abe mistakenly draws a conclusion about *what Vic must believe* from *what he (Abe) thinks Vic’s belief entails*. Moreover, assailment-by-entailment is also a failure of charity: In attributing the repugnant belief to Vic, Abe fails to think as well of Vic as he reasonably can.

2 The attitude-to-agent fallacy

“Sin begets sin.” So goes the old saying. And so it is in our cognitive lives. Having committed the cognitive sin of assailment-by-entailment, we make ourselves vulnerable to further bad inferences. More specifically, we may dispose ourselves to make unwarranted inferences from a person’s *attitude* toward a claim (belief, disbelief, suspension of judgment) to a conclusion about the *agent* herself. In this section, we’ll show how this can happen. We’ll then discuss attitude-to-agent inferences in their own right, explaining their structure and folly. Finally, we’ll draw upon recent research in social psychology to show that assailment-by-entailment and the attitude-to-agent fallacy are dangerous for an additional reason: we’re often tempted toward them.

We’ll begin with several unwarranted attitude-to-agent inferences. The first few of these take place in the context of assailment-by-entailment; subsequent examples are standalone attitude-to-agent inferences.

Let’s return to the abortion example. After learning that Judith is pro-choice, Frank accuses her of believing that murder is permissible. And

Judith, after learning that Frank is pro-life, accuses him of believing that it's permissible to curtail women's rights. As we saw, both of these moves involve the assailment-by-entailment fallacy. One can, however, imagine their conversation continuing (and ending!) with the following disparagements:

Frank: You're a moral monster!

Judith: You're a misogynistic pig!

These accusations stem from belief attributions: Frank moves from *Judith believes that it's permissible to murder innocent people* to *Judith is a moral monster* whereas Judith moves from *Frank believes that it's permissible to curtail women's rights* to *Frank is a misogynist*. Each is a clear attitude-to-agent inference. Moreover, each inference is unjustified. Generally speaking, there is a significant logical gap between *she believes such-and-such* and *she is a so-and-so*. That is, an isolated claim about a person's *attitude* is poor evidence for a negative evaluation of the person *herself*. Below, we will say more about the nature of this kind of mistake. But first we invite the reader to consider a few more examples.

Surprisingly, sometimes distinguished thinkers commit the attitude-to-agent fallacy. In his foundational work, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, John Locke argued for interreligious charity, and against religiously motivated torture and coercion. In so doing, he set the tone for centuries of discussion between Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and Muslims. Sadly, atheists were not accorded the same charity as religious folks. In Locke's words:

Those are not to be tolerated who deny the being of a God. Promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist. The taking away of a God, though but even in thought, dissolves all.⁴

Locke begins with the observation that some people believe that there's no God. According to Locke, however, if this belief is correct – if there is no God – then morality is seriously undermined. As he sees it, the absence of God entails something repugnant – *that humans have no moral obligations*. Locke then attributes the latter belief to atheists. In other words, on a plausible reading, Locke seems to be alleging that if a person believes there is no God, then she must also believe that there are no moral obligations. On his view, morality can “have no hold” on such a person. The last move, clearly, is a direct attitude-to-agent inference.

Centuries later, writing in *The New York Times*, atheist philosopher Slavoj Žižek returned Locke's favor:

The lesson of today's terrorism is that if God exists, then everything, including blowing up thousands of innocent bystanders, is permitted – at least to those who claim to act directly on behalf of God, since, clearly, a direct link to God justifies the violation of any merely human constraints and consideration (March 12, 2006).

It is not entirely clear, but Žižek seems to be suggesting that the claim that God exists entails that everything is morally permissible. So, Žižek infers, those who believe in God believe that everything is permitted. This belief makes anyone who holds it a dangerous person. Thus, religious believers don't *merely* hold dangerous beliefs; they are dangerous people – an attitude-to-agent inference.

In these examples, an attitude-to-agent attribution follows an assailment-by-entailment inference. Of course, these inferences are separable – one can occur without the other. One can make the *assailment* inference without making the attitude-to-agent inference, and vice versa. This is important because the attitude-to-agent inference deserves attention in its own right.

As a way to isolate this inference pattern, consider how comedians Kate Smurthwaite and Steve Harvey recently made headlines for their controversial comments about people who hold religious views opposed to their own. In a heated discussion on the British TV debate show *The Big Questions*, Smurthwaite quipped, "Faith by definition is believing in things without evidence. And, personally, I don't do that because I'm not an idiot."⁵ Lest you think only atheists are capable of such screech, consider an exchange between Harvey and Joy Behar on *Larry King Live*. Harvey, a Christian, was unsure how to define the term "atheist." So he asked Behar for a definition. She replied, "An atheist is someone who doesn't quite believe that...there is some god out there." Harvey responded, "Well then, to me, you are an idiot... If you believe that, then I don't like talking to you." In each of these cases, the comedian moves immediately from a claim about their dissenter's attitude (belief or disbelief in God) to a claim about the dissenter. In Smurthwaite's case it's having faith that suffices to make one an idiot; in Harvey's, it's the lack of it.

Now consider a pair of examples drawn from opposing sides of the debate over science and religion. Here is Richard Dawkins:

It is absolutely safe to say that if you meet somebody who claims not to believe in evolution, that person is ignorant, stupid or insane (or wicked, but I'd rather not consider that).⁶

Notice that, for Dawkins, one needn't *disbelieve* in evolution in order to earn an epithet. Any sort of non-belief (which includes both disbelief and suspending judgment) will do. Dawkins' move is from a claim about the agent's attitude (so-and-so disbelieves evolution or suspends judgment about it) to a claim about the agent himself.

Not to be outdone, in an interview about the design argument for God's existence, Christian apologist Dave Hunt exclaimed, "I think that you would have to be, in my opinion, an idiot to think that this universe happened by chance." Here we have an atheist apologist and a Christian apologist. For the former, unbelief in evolution suffices for idiocy; for the latter, unbelief in divine design suffices for the same.

What's wrong with these attitude-to-agent inferences? Most generally, they're faulty because their premises (claims about an agent's attitude toward some proposition) are poor evidence for their conclusions (claims about the agent herself). And no argument is good if its premises fail to provide good evidence for its conclusion. There is, in short, a large logical chasm between a single attitude attribution (e.g., she's against affirmative action) and a negative evaluation of an agent (e.g., she's a racist). Having been warned about this chasm – it is to be hoped – we'll be less prone to fall into it.

The above attitude-to-agent inferences involve fallacies of insufficient evidence. But *many* fallacious inference patterns share this fault. So, it will be helpful to diagnose attitude-to-agent fallacies in more detail. This diagnosis draws attention to certain features of the fallacies that, once recognized, can help inoculate us against them.

The first feature we'll highlight concerns the way attitude-to-agent inferences often fail to exclude alternative explanations of a dissenter's belief. Consider:

Premise: Kate is an atheist (she believes there's no God).

Conclusion: Kate is an idiot.

The premise not only fails to *force* us to the conclusion; by itself, it doesn't even point us in the direction of the conclusion. There are many alternative conclusions that are consistent with the premise of this argument. Consider just three of them:

- Kate thought carefully about God's existence, and formed her belief on the basis of the best evidence she could muster.
- Kate formed her atheistic belief after moderately careful reflection, on the basis of moderately good evidence.

- Kate formed her atheistic belief hastily, on the basis of poor evidence, but this is uncharacteristic of her – she’s usually quite careful.

All of these conclusions – and more besides – are consistent with the premise that Kate is an atheist. And given *just* this premise, all of these conclusions are hypotheses that explain Kate’s atheism at least as well as the explanation that Kate is an idiot. The atheist-to-idiot inference fails to rule out these alternative hypotheses. Without further evidence, one has no more reason to accept the idiot conclusion than any of its alternatives. Given these ‘live’ alternatives, one is quite likely to believe falsely if one infers that Kate is an idiot. One should not draw this inference – at least not without further evidence.

It is worth pausing to unpack this point. In general, if we disagree with someone, we can stick to our guns *without* attributing anything negative to the other person’s character. This is true even when we know that the other person has all the same relevant evidence that we ourselves have. Suppose, to return to our example, that Steve is a theist who has all the same evidence relevant to God’s existence as Kate has. Steve then meets Kate and discovers that she’s an atheist. He then learns that Kate has all of the same evidence that he (Steve) has. In these circumstances, Steve need not infer that Kate is an idiot. Indeed, he shouldn’t think this. But what can he sensibly think about her instead? One straightforward and charitable thing for Steve to think is that Kate has simply *made a mistake* in evaluating the evidence. Somehow, she doesn’t see what Steve is able to see – perhaps because of some subtle blind spot or uncharacteristic error in reasoning.⁷ Consistent with this, Steve might nevertheless admire Kate’s intellect *on the whole*, and assume that she is sincerely seeking the sober truth. One error does not an idiot make.

An analogy may be helpful here. Suppose we’re watching a baseball game, and watch just one performance of a particular batter. Suppose that, on this occasion, the batter strikes out. We shouldn’t infer from this that he’s a lousy hitter. Having viewed just one performance, we’re in no position to draw an overarching claim about the player’s hitting competence. And if this is right, then the parallel point applies to what Steve should think about Kate. To make the take-home point explicit: at least without further evidence, we’re unjustified in making inferences from another agent’s attitudes (she believes P) to negative attributions regarding the agent herself (she’s dumb, or wicked, or treacherous).

What makes an attitude-to-agent inference dangerous isn’t merely the fact that it’s unwarranted – though that would be bad enough. It’s also *uncharitable*. Above, we characterize intellectual charity as a matter

of attributing as much intelligence and good will to the other as one *reasonably* can, and seeking to help another person attain intellectual goods (and avoid epistemic evils) insofar as one reasonably can. And clearly, moving straight from *she and I disagree* to *she's an idiot* isn't charitable. Making the move to the latter claim should be our last resort. It is a move to be made only after we have explored and eliminated alternative, more charitable, attributions that are consistent with our discussion partner's disagreement. We wouldn't want others to perform a negative attitude-to-agent inference on us; so we shouldn't perform this inference on them.

As we've seen, the attitude-to-agent fallacy is dangerous for several reasons. It leads us into false and unwarranted beliefs. Worse still, it leads us into false and unwarranted beliefs that are harmful to others. In virtue of this, it breeds dissension and soils discourse. These features alone should prompt us toward vigilance against the fallacy. But there's another reason we should redouble our efforts to avoid it: research in social psychology suggests that humans are *disposed* to commit the fallacy.

As psychologist Robert Abelson insightfully observes, we treat our beliefs like *possessions*. Consider how we speak of our beliefs. We *acquire* them, we *obtain* them, we *buy into* them, we *maintain* them, we *abandon* them, we *discard* them – just as we do our cars and computers. As a result, when our beliefs are under attack, we protect them just as we protect our physical possessions.⁸ And clearly, when we find ourselves party to disagreement over our cherished beliefs, those beliefs *are* under attack. In such circumstances, we may be especially vulnerable to questionable inferences.

One well-known mechanism that can lead to this is *cognitive dissonance*. Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson describe it like this: “cognitive dissonance is a state of tension that occurs whenever one holds two cognitions (ideas, attitudes, beliefs, opinions) that are psychologically inconsistent.”⁹ Such dissonance, they explain, produces mental discomfort that prompts us to resolve the tension between competing cognitions.

Suppose, for example, that Bud drinks a lot of beer and, being the mindful chap that he is, he *knows* that he drinks a case of beer every day. If he also comes to believe that drinking large amounts of alcohol is bad for his health, he will experience cognitive dissonance. He'll then be prompted to remove this dissonance. Bud might tell himself, “Perhaps there's a flaw in the studies that seem to expose the dangers of alcohol.” Or Bud might resolve the dissonance by giving up the habit, or by telling himself that he'll quit very soon.

It's easy to see how cognitive dissonance might make a person vulnerable to the attitude-to-agent fallacy. Notice that the phenomenon of disagreement is a common source of dissonance. For when we're made aware of intelligent, sincere people who disagree with us, we thereby receive at least *some* evidence that our beliefs are mistaken or unwarranted¹⁰ – and this can introduce dissonance. To make this concrete, suppose Peggy believes that God exists and comes to believe that Sue, an intelligent and good-willed person, disagrees with her. Dissonance theory says that under such circumstances, Peggy will attempt to reduce the dissonance between these two beliefs. And if she's prone to protecting her most cherished beliefs, Peggy will do this by trying to salvage her belief about God. She may be tempted to do this by abandoning her belief that Sue really is intelligent and sincere, and by adopting some other (less flattering) belief about Sue. In other words, the cognitive dissonance may well tempt Peggy toward the attitude-to-agent fallacy. Of course, things don't *have* to go this way. The disagreement may lead Peggy to revise her belief about God, or to make a more charitable inference about Sue (e.g., that Sue has simply made a mistake). But given her awareness of the stakes and the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance (psychologists liken our tendency to reduce it as akin to the tendencies to reduce hunger and thirst) the circumstances should clearly raise Peggy's guard. For under the circumstances described, she's clearly more prone to making attitude-to-agent inferences than she would otherwise be.

An additional reason for caution is the tendency toward what psychologists call *fundamental attribution error*.¹¹ This error – called “fundamental” because it's so pervasive in human cognition – concerns our tendency to *overestimate* the influence of stable character on the actions of others and to *underestimate* the influence of others' situations in explaining their behavior. For example, if we see another person trip, we're apt to characterize him as *clumsy*. If we ourselves trip, well, it was that *damned curb* that made us stumble. Likewise, if we notice that someone is nervous before giving a public lecture, we're prone to characterize her as a nervous *person*. If we ourselves are nervous prior to giving a similar lecture, it's just because we're in a stressful situation – it's not because we're characteristically nervous. If we see a father bawling out his kids, we think he's a mean dad; but if we yell at our kids, it's because we're especially stressed and they're being especially obnoxious.

The research on fundamental attribution error is ongoing. At this stage, there is no consensus about the exact frequency with which human subjects fall prey to this sort of reasoning. However, many psychologists

think we are highly susceptible to this mistake. This is relevant to our discussion of the attitude-to-agent fallacy. For the two inference patterns are strikingly similar. In a simple case, when committing the fundamental attribution error, one moves from a single performance (he yelled at his kids) to a character attribution (he's a mean *person*). In committing the attitude-to-agent fallacy, one moves from a single *belief* of another person (she's an atheist) to a broader negative evaluation of the person herself (she's an idiot). Further, suppose we think of beliefs as cognitive performances. Given that thought, whenever someone commits the attitude-to-agent fallacy and concludes that her dissenter has bad character, she thereby commits the fundamental attribution error. So some cases of the attitude-to-agent fallacy are themselves instances of the fundamental attribution error. In light of the similarity between the two inference patterns, the research on fundamental attribution error should set us on guard against the attitude-to-agent fallacy. If we're prone to committing the one, there's reason to think we're prone to committing the other.¹²

3 How the intellectual virtues can help

The previous sections were devoted to the explanation and evaluation of two fallacies that plague contemporary public discourse. In this final section, we suggest ways in which the intellectual virtues can help militate against these fallacies. We'll focus on two virtues: charity and humility.

Intellectual charity requires a disposition to attribute at least as much intelligence and goodwill toward one's discussion partners as one reasonably can. Given this, it's not hard to see how assailing-by-entailment and the attitude-to-agent fallacy can involve failures to exhibit charity. After learning that Judith takes a pro-choice stance, Frank accuses her of believing that murder is permissible. In doing so, Frank clearly attributes less good will to her than he reasonably can. Judith exhibits a similar lack of charity when she attributes misogynistic beliefs to Frank on the basis of his pro-life position. Likewise, when the comedians Harvey and Smurthwaite account for their religious dissenters' beliefs by inferring that these people are idiots, they attribute less intelligence to their dissenters than they reasonably can. Locke and Žižek do the same sort of thing in inferring from their dissenters' views that people who hold such positions are immoral or dangerous.

The two fallacies we've been considering involve failures of charity. These failures foil and soil discourse. Fortunately, the exercise of

intellectual charity can help us avoid these fallacies – and that’s *good* for public discourse. In this connection, we suggest the following guidelines for exercising charity in the face of disagreement:

- Actively consider the attitudes and traits you are attributing to others.
- If you are tempted to attribute to someone a repugnant *belief*, consider whether you have good grounds for doing so. (The distinction between belief attribution and logical entailment may be helpful here. Perhaps you merely have grounds for thinking that your dissenter’s belief *entails* the repugnant claim.)
- If you think that your dissenter’s belief entails something repugnant, consider inviting your dissenter to discuss whether or not the entailment holds. For example, Frank and Judith might turn their discussion to the question of whether or not their (previously) unstated beliefs are true. That is, they could discuss (a) whether, in fact, the pro-life view really does entail that it is permissible to curtail women’s rights and (b) whether, in fact, the pro-choice view really does entail that it is permissible to murder innocent people.
- If you are tempted to attribute to your dissenter a vicious *character trait*, consider whether you have good grounds for this.
- As you do this, consider alternative explanations for your dissenter’s belief – for example, perhaps she simply made an error on this occasion, or perhaps she’s perfectly rational, after all – perhaps *you* have made the mistake.

In doing all of the above, you will treat your interlocutor as you would like to be treated. You’ll commit fewer fallacies and keep more friends. More than this, you’ll raise your chances for *productive* conversations. By avoiding assailment-by-entailment, for instance, you’ll refrain from ascribing a bad belief to a person, and instead draw attention to the potential logical consequences of her view. And by drawing attention to the potential logical consequences of your dissenter’s view, you can often focus the discussion in a way that fosters progress.

Recall the discussion between Frank and Judith above. Suppose they refrained from performing assailment-by-entailment on each other. This would immediately lower the stakes of the discussion: no one would be on trial for misogyny or for callously shrugging off the deaths of innocents. Frank and Judith could then direct their attention to the crucial entailment claims themselves. That is, they could focus on whether the pro-choice position really entails that murder is permissible, and

on whether the pro-life position entails an unacceptable restriction on women's rights. Those entailment claims are, as they say, "where the action is." At the very least, avoiding assailment-by-entailment would give them a chance to have a productive discussion of these crucial issues. Of course, there is no guarantee that the two of them would come to consensus, or even that they *would* have a productive discussion. Nevertheless, all things being equal, discussions that avoid assailment-by-entailment have a better chance at success than discussions that include it.

When it comes to the attitude-to-agent inference, it almost goes without saying that exercising charity curbs the fallacy and leads to better discussions. After all, charitable people don't tend to call their dissenters idiots or dangerous. And after all, it's not as though it would take *much* to improve discussions in which people do engage in such name-calling. A bit of charity – along with some intellectual restraint – can improve the quality of such discussions. Moreover, if an exercise of intellectual charity utilizes the suggestions made above, it will invite consideration of *why* one's dissenter believes as she does. To put it in a personal way: If I refrain from thinking that my dissenter is an idiot, I'm thereby open to considering alternative explanations of her belief. Perhaps she has not assessed her evidence well; or perhaps her evidence is misleading. Or perhaps *I'm* the one who has made a mistake, or whose evidence is misleading. Humility would seem to require that I at least consider these possibilities – especially once I come to see that the "she's an idiot" explanation is both uncharitable and unjustified. And if I cease to see my dissenter as an idiot, I may come to see her as someone from whom I can learn. If I come reasonably to see her as intelligent and well meaning, I may even consider the possibility that I am mistaken. The willingness to consider *that* possibility is conspicuously absent from our public discourse. Perhaps if more of us consider it, the state of public discourse can once again rise above the ocean floor.¹³

Notes

1. See A. Rosenthal (2012) "Has Political Discourse Hit Rock Bottom?," *The New York Times*, The Opinion Pages (blog post). Available at: <http://taking-note.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/07/has-political-discourse-reached-rock-bottom/>; see also R. Ponnuru (2012) "I'm Right, You're Wrong, and Other Political Truths," *Bloomberg View*, August 12. Available at: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-08-20/i-m-right-you-re-wrong-and-other-political-truths.html>.

2. Other sources of help include R. Ritchhart (2002) *Intellectual Character: What it is, Why it Matters, and How to Get it* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass); D. Howard-Snyder, F. Howard-Snyder and R. Wasserman (2009) *The Power of Logic* (New York: McGraw Hill); R. Roberts and J. Wood (2007) *Intellectual Virtues* (New York: Oxford University Press); and J. Baehr (2011) *The Inquiring Mind: On the Intellectual Virtues & Virtue Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press).
3. For discussion, see especially Roberts and Wood, *Intellectual Virtues*.
4. J. Locke (1983) *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. James Tully (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing), 51.
5. It is possible to see something like *assailment-by-entailment* in Smurthwaite's comments. For present purposes, we leave this to the side.
6. R. Dawkins (1989) "Put Your Money on Evolution," *New York Times*, April 9.
7. For a detailed development of this line of thought, see T. Kelly (2005) "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement," in J. Hawthorne and T. Szabo-Gendler (eds) *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press), 167–96. Though Kelly's work addresses the issue of what one should think of one's dissenters, its primary focus is a related question: should disagreement lead one to abandon one's own beliefs *about the disputed topic itself*? This question has spawned a large literature in epistemology. See, in addition to Kelly's paper, R. Feldman (2006) "Epistemological Puzzles about Disagreement," in S. Hetherington (ed.), *Epistemology Futures* (New York: Oxford University Press), and D. Christensen (2009) "Disagreement as Evidence: The Epistemology of Controversy," *Philosophy Compass* 4, 756–67.
8. See the discussion of Abelson's work in T. Gilovich (1991) *How We Know What Isn't So* (New York: The Free Press), 85–87.
9. C. Tavis and E. Aronson (2007) *Mistakes Were Made (but not by me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts* (New York: Harcourt), 13. L. Festinger (1957) *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson) is the seminal work on dissonance theory.
10. On this, see Christensen, "Disagreement as Evidence."
11. See L. Ross and R. Nisbett (1991) *The Person and the Situation* (New York: McGraw Hill).
12. As we suggest, it would be premature to claim that the research demonstrates *conclusively* that we're vulnerable to the fundamental attribution error, much less the attitude-to-agent fallacy (see J. Sabini, M. Siepmann, and J. Stein (2001) "The Really Fundamental Attribution Error in Social Psychological Research," *Psychological Inquiry* 12: 1–15). Nevertheless, even if the evidence doesn't justify full belief that we're prone to the attitude-to-agent fallacy, it seems to justify *caution* whenever we find ourselves embroiled in disagreement. Unless and until we get strong evidence that we have no fallacious tendency, it's best to stand watch against it.
13. The authors contributed equally to this essay. For helpful comments and discussion we would like to thank Mike Austin, Nathan Ballantyne, Tomas Bogardus, Patty Bruinicks, Amy Garcia, Gary Varner, Kristie King, Tim Pawl, and Peter Wicks.