

Disaster and Debate

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Abstract. Faced with a national tragedy, citizens respond in different ways. Some will initiate debate about the possible connections between this tragedy and broader moral and political issues. But others often complain that this is too early, that it is inappropriate to debate such larger issues while ‘the bodies are still warm’. This paper critically examines the grounds for such a complaint. We consider different interpretations of the complaint—cynical, epistemic and ethical—and argue that it can be resisted on all of these readings. Debate shortly after a national disaster is therefore permissible. We then set out a political argument in favour of early debate based on the value of broad political participation in liberal democracies and sketch a stronger argument, based on the duty to support just institutions, that would support a political duty to engage in debate shortly after tragedies have occurred.

1. Introduction

When a major tragedy occurs—say, a shocking terrorist attack, or the death of an innocent person because of police brutality—it is common to respond, not only with shock and grief, but also by tying the tragedy to larger (typically pre-existing) political or moral debate—seeing it as providing support for some side of that debate, or as otherwise forcing us to draw, and implement, some important larger lessons and policies.

This response to disaster almost invariably generates the complaint that it is simply *too early* to debate such larger questions, that such debate must wait, that it is wrong and inappropriate to discuss or debate such larger issues while ‘the bodies are still warm’. Writing after the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, journalist Frank Bruni expressed this complaint in an impassioned plea:

“Can’t we wait until we’ve resolved the body count? Until the identities of all of the victims have been determined and their families informed? Until the sirens stop wailing? Until the blood is dry? Or must we instantly bootstrap obliquely related agendas and utterly unconnected grievances to the carnage in Paris, responding to it with an unsavory opportunism instead of a respectful grief? ... Before we knew all that much about what had happened, before many Americans had even caught word of it, before the ones who were aware had moved past horror and numbness, Paris wasn’t just a massacre. It was a megaphone to be used for whatever you yearned to shout.” (Bruni, 2015)

This complaint is such a common phenomenon that it has in turn given rise to what amounts to a meta-debate about the appropriateness of debate following tragedy. After Sandy Hook shooting, where 27 people (many of them children) were brutally murdered at an elementary school in Newtown Connecticut, many US liberals pressed for stricter gun laws. In response, many on the right were outraged at what they saw as a cynical exploitation of a tragedy for political ends. On the very day of the tragedy, the White House press secretary, Jay Carney, agreed that it was too early to debate these issues: “There is, I am sure, will be, rather, a day for discussion of the usual Washington policy debates [about gun control], but I do not think today is that day.” (Landler & Goode, 2012) However, Obama’s public response to Sandy Hook

the same day hinted that political change needed to happen: ‘As a country, we have been through this too many times... And we’re going to have to come together and take meaningful action to prevent more tragedies like this...’ Encouraged by Obama’s statement, Democrat lawmaker Jerrold Nadler seized this opportunity to express the view that President Obama *should* ‘exploit’ the tragedy to nudge Congress to action.

The topic of this paper is this meta-debate about tragedy and debate. There is much discussion about the nature of practical, collective and political deliberation but little about the appropriate *timing* of deliberation. Questions about the appropriate time to start debate after a tragedy are a special instance of that larger question. We want to clarify what might be behind the common complaint that it is wrong to start debate too early, and to assess its validity and force. Is it really true that we should wait ‘until the blood is dry’? And if so, why, and till when? Conversely, is there perhaps something to be said in favour of early debate?

We shall proceed as follows. We will consider three ways of interpreting the complaint—each of which, we believe, captures at least part of what typically drives it. The first reading is that the complaint is merely cynical and instrumental: an attempt to suppress debate for political gain. We shall argue that although the complaint obviously sometimes takes such a form, this is nevertheless an implausible account of what is at its core. The second reading is epistemic: early debate is likely to lead to mistaken conclusions. We shall argue that although epistemic worries can sometimes be legitimately raised about premature debate, these are fairly limited or must appeal to controversial assumptions, and other epistemic considerations can be marshalled to support early debate. The third reading of the complaint we shall consider is ethical in character: early debate, as Bruni suggests in the quote above, is incompatible with ‘respectful grief’. We shall argue that although this is the most interesting reading, powerful ethical considerations can again also be marshalled to support early debate. We shall end by tying this meta-debate to considerations relating to the distinctive value of public debate in liberal democracies. We shall argue that such considerations offer positive *political* grounds in favour of engaging in early debate and—though more tentatively—even for the stronger claim that citizens might have a duty to do so. We will therefore conclude that the passionate conviction that debate after tragedy is too early is misplaced.

Our primary aim in this paper is to bring a measure of philosophical clarity to a question of considerable practical import. But we see our discussion as also bearing on broader questions about the norms that should govern political speech. Discussion of such norms has typically focused on restrictions relating to hate speech, verbal assault and even reasonableness. But questions about less stringent norms relating to the *modality* of appropriate political speech have received less attention. We see our argument here about the timing of debate, as well as about the relation between political debate and expression of emotion in the public sphere, as making a contribution to the more general issue of the ethics pertaining to the modality of political speech. Moreover, while our primary focus is on a concrete practical issue, in the course of our argument we will also touch upon a range of issues of theoretical interest, including questions about the compatibility of political debate and respectful grief, and about what we will call the ‘temporal division of moral labour’.

2. Preliminaries

Before we start, let us briefly clarify what we mean by public debate. In the first instance, we mean moral or political debate of the kind typically led in the media (but also in political institutions) by politicians, pundits and commentators. But public

debate of this kind almost always reaches out further and also encompasses more local or informal forms of debate, such as when ordinary citizens express their views in social media, online comments or blogs.

We will understand tragedy in a fairly broad and loose sense: we mean to refer to events that seize the national consciousness because of the scope of the harm they caused or because of the severity of the injustice involved. Typically, these are not mere natural disasters but events that may well, and typically do, be associated (directly or indirectly) with serious wrongdoing—though this itself would often be subject to debate.

We shall assume, as is generally assumed by both sides of this meta-debate, that a tragedy in this sense can often bear in some important way on broader moral and political issues—typically by offering some potential further support to some normative conclusion. We do not have space here to fully spell out how such a particular tragedy can support such a conclusion, and this will anyway vary from case to case. This will also depend on whether the debate is about factual issues or normative ones or, as is more often the case, some mixture of the two. In some cases, a tragedy can potentially provide important empirical evidence supporting some broader conclusion but in other cases it does not change the overall balance of relevant empirical evidence (yet another shooting will not dramatically change the gun-related homicide statistics). But even in the latter case, it seems plausible that confrontation with a terrible tragedy can yield new *normative* insight and help us grasp moral reasons we did not previously recognize or understand; we shall return to this issue below, when we discuss the epistemic interpretation of the complaint.

It is important to distinguish the complaint that debate is too early from the accusation that there is really no interesting supporting relation between the event and the supposed general lesson—in the quotation from Bruni above, he also speaks of tying ‘unconnected grievances to the carnage’. This is often enough a legitimate complaint of its own—but whether it is would *itself* be a matter of debate, precisely the kind of debate that the complaint we are interested in wishes to postpone.

We take our question to be concerned with the social norms or conventions that should govern political speech rather than with more stringent legal restrictions that might, for example, prohibit hate speech. The complaint about early debate is that such debate violates such norms of speech, and if this complaint can withstand critical scrutiny, the upshot should be general endorsement of such norms across the various political divides.

Finally, notice that while at one level the meta-debate is about the appropriate timing of debate, at a more practical level it can also be understood as concerned with whether, *given* that many people do want to engage in early debate, it is appropriate to impose norms that would discourage or even suppress such acts. This way of framing the meta-debate brings out, we believe, an important presumption in favour of early debate. After all, most proponents of early debate are perfectly happy for others to stay out of or ignore the debate. It is those who put forward the complaint who, in effect, wish to suppress the political speech of others. The onus is therefore on them to show that there weighty reasons to do so.

We would like to end this preliminary section with a remark about the appropriate timing of the *meta*-debate about the timing of debate. Isn’t there a risk of regress here? Not really. We think it is obvious that it *would* be better to resolve this meta-debate at some distance from any specific tragedy. Indeed, we find it strange that, all too often, this meta-debate arises *only* in connection with particular tragedies, and is thus itself tainted by worries of partisanship and bias. Our aim here is precisely

to contribute to this goal at some remove from any substantive partisan disagreements.¹

We now turn to examine three possible readings of the complaint that it is too early to engage in public debate after tragedy: cynical, epistemic and ethical.

3. The Cynical Reading

One striking feature of this meta-debate is that inconsistency on this matter seems so common. After some tragedies, you will find, say, conservatives pressing the need for larger discussion and liberals enraged at this exploitation of a catastrophe; after other tragedies, liberals see debate as imperative, and conservatives are enraged.

This point does suggest a cynical reading of both the opening of debate, and of the complaint against doing so. The opening of debate may be seen in purely causal terms: the shock of the tragedy has a certain causal influence that favours one side to a debate, and it is in the interest of that side to press the issue in this context to best promote its objectives. And since the opposing side may stand to lose in this way from the taking up of the debate at this point, it therefore naturally wishes to resist or postpone discussion. A call for delay, or outrage about the initiation of debate may also be cynical and instrumental. On this reading, both the opening up of debate and resistance to debate are purely instrumental, manipulative manoeuvres and counter-manoevres by interested sides.

The cynical reading, however, is self-defeating since the accusation of ‘unsavoury opportunism’ (Bruni) it makes against those who wish to engage in debate can easily be also directed against attempts to shut down debate, deflating any normative force it may have at first seemed to have. Worse, by so readily imputing false motives to others, this understanding of the complaint risks undermining political debate more generally since the imputation of bad faith is on the table, it can be easily enough applied across the board.

Setting outright cynicism aside, we presumably want some consistent line about this meta-issue, we cannot defend the appropriateness of early debate when it fits us, yet denounce it when it doesn’t. We do not deny that such instrumental considerations are often operative in either side of such meta-debates; they obviously are. But only a complete cynic would believe that this is all there is to it. It seems plain that some genuinely believe that a given tragedy is an appropriate trigger for a larger discussion (or even that such a larger discussion is morally *mandated* by the tragedy), while others genuinely find this response distasteful or worse

¹ An anonymous reviewer objected that our framing of the issue in terms of a binary choice between debating early and debating later misses out an important alternative. Even if we postpone debate, this doesn’t mean we must do nothing. Early debate can squander the opportunity raised by a time of unusual unity and focus. Instead of focusing on issues that divide us, we can focus on promoting shared goals. Instead using the Newtown tragedy as a platform for debating gun control or violent video games, we could instead use this an occasion to discuss ways to help troubled adolescents, to reform mental health services at high schools, and so forth. This is an important suggestion, and we do agree both that debate isn’t the only thing that should follow tragedy and that it has costs. Notice, however, that such unifying initiatives also have considerable costs. In many cases, they will amount to favouring one side of a debate (‘let’s focus on mental health, not on guns’) rather than to its postponement, and grand shows of unity are often just ways of preserving the status quo. Moreover, what we should regard as our common goals will itself often be contentious. Still, we’re happy to concede that there are cases where it would be best if a visionary political leader unified a polity following disaster in ways that transcend debate. But, for better or worse, this just isn’t likely to be the common case.

Finally, the purely cynical reading offers no answer to the question of whether, when and how debate should begin after a tragedy. Yet it seems that there is a genuine question here that calls for a reasoned reply. We want to identify a principled answer; we do not want to just cynically change our view on this meta-question in line with our first-order political goals in this or that context. We can all agree that *that* kind of approach really is distasteful. So we need to find some independent line on this meta-issue, independent of (and prior to) any perceived benefits or harm of early/late debate about some particular tragedy.

4. The Epistemic Reading

4.1 Not enough evidence?

Setting aside such purely instrumental considerations, a natural alternative way of understanding the complaint is in epistemic terms. In its simplest form, the epistemic worry might just be the familiar one about the danger of jumping to conclusions about factual matters before enough evidence is in. Deliberation that is based on false beliefs will typically lead to mistaken conclusions. When these conclusions have important practical implications, this is obviously dangerous. And even if it turns out that the beliefs weren't false, there is still something awry about deliberation that starts from factual premises that aren't justified.

Deliberation that sets out before there is enough solid evidence is not only likely to fail, but is also wasteful—we are likely to waste much time and effort in directions that later prove irrelevant (e.g. the murderous spree was by someone mentally ill rather than a terrorist). We often need to postpone deliberation until some threshold of basic factual knowledge is reached. We should first focus on gathering information about what happened, not on debating what it means.

On the other hand, deliberation (personal or public) still has to start at some point, and that point cannot be one of complete certainty—otherwise deliberation could never start. Deliberation almost invariably takes place in conditions of uncertainty, even substantial uncertainty, and the mere risk of error is not a good reason to postpone debate.

We can agree that for deliberation to make sense, we need to know enough, though it may be harder to agree on (or explicitly define) what counts as enough. It is perhaps more important that early debate should appropriately weigh the quality of the available evidence. Early deliberation needn't mean jumping to any conclusion. And of course deliberation (and debate) can be adjusted and updated as new evidence comes in, even if that evidence upturns prior assumptions. Finally, debate can itself play an important part in clarifying factual issues, identifying weak or controversial factual assumptions, or suggesting important new lines of factual inquiry. These may be overlooked or ignored if debate is postponed.

In any event, although we often do not know enough in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, and although initial assumptions sometimes turn out to be utterly mistaken, it is common enough that we know enough fairly early on. Yet the target complaint is still persistently pressed even on these occasions. So it couldn't just be a demand to wait for more factual information. The complaint is often about what is *done* with the information one does have—a complaint that will remain even if that information is solid and indisputable.

4.2 Strong emotions distort deliberation?

The epistemic reading can take a second form. On this understanding of the complaint, the worry isn't that the factual basis for debate is lacking, but that debate

itself would be biased if it begins in too close a proximity to a tragedy. The question, then, is whether and how timing might matter for deliberation.

One natural way of fleshing out the complaint in this way is to see it as highlighting the distortive effect of the emotional impact of a recent tragedy. The idea, then, is that deliberating in an agitated, distraught state often leads to poor judgment.

Notice that this form of the objection is in a way the reverse of the cynical reading. That earlier reading involved the suggestion that the emotion being expressed was insincere, while here the complaint is that it is *too* strong. But the two readings are compatible if those raising the debate early are doing so in order to cynically exploit the (genuine) emotions of others.

Let us assume then—as seems plausible—that the emotional effect of a tragedy, when in closer ‘proximity’, can have a significant *causal* effect on deliberation.² The question now is whether this effect is indeed epistemically problematic. If the claim is simply that emotion has an overall negative effect on the quality of debate then, while this is certainly a view of emotion that some hold, it is also a view that others vigorously deny. Emotion is not the contrary of reason. Far from being merely a blind, raging force, emotion can play an essential role in evaluation and in identifying what is morally salient about a situation (Greenspan, 2004; Helm, 2001). Indeed, one can also hold that excessive coldness, and emotional detachment from an event, are biasing factors in deliberation, and thus that it is rather *postponing* deliberation that will have the distorting epistemic effect.³

In saying this, we aren’t denying the obvious point that the strong emotions generated by some tragedies can have pernicious effects—one just needs to think here of lynch mobs or the targeting of random Muslims after Islamist terrorist attacks. But we are asking about the effect of emotion on debate, not about its effect on immediate action. And if certain emotional responses to tragedy are highly problematic this doesn’t yet show that other, more appropriate affective responses, aren’t epistemically vital. So this understanding of the complaint makes it depend on a rather controversial view of emotion. Those who reject this view can ignore the complaint, or even press a complaint in the opposite direction, leaving us at a seeming stalemate.

Moreover, if it is to support a principled reading of the complaint, this epistemic view must be held consistently: one needs to *generally* think that emotion is to be avoided, not only in the context of some specific tragedy (where the emotional effect seems to point in a direction one doesn’t favour), or even tragedy in general. It seems to us doubtful that people who make this complaint really do oppose emotion across the board in this way. Indeed, if the worry is ultimately about emotion (and not proximity per se), then we should also make sure to avoid any emotionally resonant

² Notice that, strictly speaking, it’s not literally proximity to the tragedy that may have this emotional effect but rather proximity to our *awareness* that the tragedy has happened. For sometimes we only know about the tragedy at a later point. And the emotional effect only hits us then.

³ The worry about emotion can take a more specific form. According to Kübler-Ross’s (1969) influential account, grief unfolds in five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. And as the public goes through these stages, their views could be biased in predictable ways. For example, in the denial stage, they will be reluctant to base their conclusions on what really happened, and in the bargaining phase they might be willing to make rotten compromises they would later regret. In reply, consider first that although this theory of grief is popular, it has limited empirical support (see Friedman & James, 1998). Second, the theory is meant as an account of individual grief and cannot be assumed to apply to the very different emotional states of spectators. Third, grief isn’t the only emotion that follows tragedy. Emotions such as moral outrage are just as common and often more dominant. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this objection.

ways of thinking about the tragedy even at much later points in time. But, so far as we can see, nobody hold *that* view.

Finally, even if one thinks that strong emotion can bias deliberation, and that there is therefore at least some reason to postpone debate, there is still the point that there is another, arguably positive, epistemic factor associated with proximity to a tragedy. We usually apprehend an event far more fully and vividly when it is fairly recent, something that declines over time as the event gradually recedes into the past until it becomes a distant memory or even forgotten.⁴ Moreover, on influential accounts of moral epistemology a more vivid apprehension of the relevant situation is an epistemically *positive* factor (Moller, 2009).⁵ And this supports earlier rather than later debate. If we wait too long, we may lose part of our grip on what really happened, and this may compromise deliberation.

4.3. *The wrong emotion?*

It might be objected that the real epistemic worry about early debate is not that it engages too much emotion but that it engages the *wrong* emotions. In particular, it engages our empathy with the victims of the tragedy but empathy—so the objection continues—is a problematic emotion. Jesse Prinz has argued, for example, that empathy is easily biased and easy to manipulate, and that it is poor at motivating action (Prinz, 2011). Paul Bloom complains that empathy is “parochial, narrow-minded, and innumerate” (Bloom, 2013), as illustrated by psychological research showing that people care more about the plight of one individual they can relate to than about the suffering of many people that shows up in statistics (Jenni and Loewenstein 1997). If early debate leads to excess empathy it could, in this way, lead us astray.

This harsh view of empathy is certainly a minority view and we obviously don’t have the space to fully address it. But some remarks in response are in order.

The objection assumes that early debate would be dominated by empathy rather than by other emotions. While this seems plausible, it seems plausible because ‘empathy’ can mean very many different things. The form of empathy that Prinz and Bloom object to is that of putting oneself in another person’s shoes and feeling her pain. But Prinz commends feeling *concern* for others, which also seem a common response following tragedy. And Prinz’s main aim is to persuade us to replace empathy with moral *anger*. Yet it is obvious that anger and outrage are common emotional responses following tragedies that involve injustice. Tragedies clearly elicit what, on this view, is the *right* emotion!

There is more force to the worry that empathy might make us attribute excessive importance to the victims of a national tragedy, thereby neglecting less salient forms of harm that add up to a far greater evil. But this worry can come in at least two forms. The stronger form is broadly consequentialist. It is commonly expressed, following tragedies, by the complaint that many more people in the West die from traffic accidents, or people in developing countries from preventable disease, than die from, e.g., terrorist attacks in the USA or Europe. This is an interesting complaint but it is not our target complaint. It is not the complaint that it’s inappropriate to begin debate too early after tragedy but that such debate is generally misplaced because such acute tragedies are simply not that important. Neither side of

⁴ It is plausible that this time course is causally—perhaps even conceptually—tied up with the point about the decline of emotion, but we can set aside here this larger question.

⁵ As Moller points out, what Nussbaum (1992) calls ‘moral imagination’ can be interpreted in similar terms.

the meta-debate we're interested in hold this revisionary view so there is no need for us to address it here.

But the worry can take a weaker form that needn't assume a revisionary consequentialist outlook. Even if we think that, for example, terrorist attacks or police brutality deserve special public attention, we can still agree that attention to such dramatic events can be excessive and that we tend to neglect important kinds of harms that are not emotionally gripping in this way.

There are four points to make in reply. There is first the simple point that it's doubtful that postponing debate is going to help. It would just mean that we would give less attention to *both* the victims of dramatic tragedies and those of scattered, less dramatic harms.

The second is that the whole point of debate is to critically assess our beliefs, reasons and, indeed, emotional reactions and place them within a broader deliberative context. Justice Holmes famously said that 'great cases, like hard ones, make bad law.' But what is at issue is not whether we should decide some debate on the basis of a recent tragedy but whether this tragedy should be the occasion of a larger debate—a debate that should take into account the larger picture, and the full range of relevant evidence. Questions about the extent to which televised instances of police brutality are indeed representative of the wider factual situation as measured by hard data and statistics are exactly the kind of questions that normally arise in the context of intense debate and, in fact, such debate is often the spur for the kind of research that provides the relevant broader evidence.

There is, third, the further point that in the vast majority of cases, information and arguments relating to the larger debate—including the kind of hard statistical data Bloom has in mind—will be far more readily available immediately post-tragedy than at later points. Debate at later points, by contrast, would often be conducted against a more impoverished informational environment.

The fourth point we will develop below: it is simply that early debate in no way commits us to ending the discussion prematurely, before the specific tragedy was placed in a wider network of evidence and reasons.

4.4 An empirical question?

We can understand epistemic worries about the timing of debate as concerned with reliability: is early debate less reliable than later debate? This is in part an empirical question that cannot be resolved in the armchair.⁶ It is not one that is easy to study since, needless to say, one cannot conduct controlled experiments about the effects of starting public debate at different points in time. It's also doubtful that there is a general answer to this question that cuts across differences between tragedies, contexts, and countries. Which isn't to say that there isn't relevant empirical evidence out there. For example, Motalvo (2011) provides evidence strongly suggesting that terror attacks can change voting patterns, and Lerner et al. (2003) found that fear has different effects on the perceived risks of terrorism compared to anger (see also Lattanzi-Licht and Doka (2003) for a social science perspective on public tragedy). However, while questions about reliability cannot be entirely resolved in the armchair, they are also not entirely a matter for fieldwork. When we have an independent grip on the relevant factual matters, we could in principle investigate how well these facts are tracked by early debate. But the relevant debates are often concerned with contentious and normatively loaded issues, meaning that there is no neutral way to evaluate reliability. In any event, so long as there isn't strong evidence

⁶ We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this point.

that early debate is less reliable, then it's hard to see how the epistemic reading of the complaint can go through.

4.5 *Where this leaves us*

So far as we can see, the kind of epistemic considerations we have surveyed don't strongly support postponing debate—while some considerations may support later deliberation, others strongly support early deliberation. Notice, in addition, that it is those who wish to institute social norms repressing early debate who need to establish that early debate is defective. Even if the overall balance of epistemic factors doesn't conclusively support either side, this should still be sufficient to make early debate at least permissible.

Moreover, we can move beyond that stalemate by bearing in mind the distinction between *starting* deliberation too early, and *concluding* it too early. These are separate worries. When one worries about making rash decisions, or jumping to conclusions (when these conclusions are really *conclusive*, not just stages in deliberation), then one is really worried about the latter—not so much that deliberation starts too early, but that there won't be *enough* of it, or even that one would merely be following a gut reaction.

We can acknowledge that worry, but it is not what the complaint in question is about. The complaint is about *starting* debate too early. It is another matter when it should end—and we can agree that this shouldn't be too soon. But when we start deliberation says nothing as to when it should (or even will) end.

Once we bear in mind this simple distinction, and once we recognize epistemic considerations pointing in both directions (or otherwise uncertainty as to which of these has the overall upper hand), it seems that an appropriate response is to start debate soon enough, but make sure it doesn't end *too* soon—so that we can potentially 'enjoy' the benefit of both 'warm' (or 'proximal') and 'cold' (or 'distant') influences on deliberation and debate.

So to the extent that the issue is seen in purely epistemic terms, the balance of reasons supports early deliberation, so long as it is based on a sufficient evidential base and doesn't end too soon.⁷

5. The Ethical Reading

5.1 *Compromises emotion, and disrespects the victims?*

Let us now set aside such epistemic considerations, and turn to a final ethical reading of the complaint. When tragedy occurs, this calls for a certain response. This called for response is in a sense emotional, but it is not merely an inner feeling, but a whole orientation to things: what we should attend to and what we should ignore, as well as what we should do (e.g. pay our respects), and what we should avoid doing (e.g. jokes are inappropriate during grief).

Now it might be claimed that debate, or the drawing of general (or even specific) lessons from a tragedy, are incompatible with (or otherwise compromise)

⁷ Consider another epistemic worry. If we start debate too early, before all the facts are in, people will form premature views about the lessons of the tragedy, views that will persevere even if the initial information turns out to be mistaken—say, some murders were actually carried out by white supremacists rather than Islamists, as initially assumed. This is admittedly a risk. As we emphasize, starting debate early in no way commits us to arriving at rash decisions. Notice, moreover, that even if we postpone debate, this hardly means that people won't form views early on—including highly biased ones—about the tragedy and its lessons. It's just that these views won't have to be articulated, or get exposed to a broader range of evidence, perspectives and arguments. Postponing debate won't prevent the perseverance of prematurely established conclusions. It may make it worse.

such an appropriate response—that they are in tension with *feeling genuine grief*. All this can wait, this version of the complaint says, until the time for grief is done. There is also the point that by starting debate, one essentially forces others to engage in it, even if only in second-order responses of complaint about the initiation of debate. This can be seen as a kind of ‘affective pollution’ that prevents appropriate responses even from those who do not want to now engage in this debate—most obviously, the surviving victims themselves, or their immediate relations.

Moreover, not only does debate draw our consciousness away from grief, it may also make the grief we do profess seem insincere. What we really care about, it might seem, is the general political point that we think is demonstrated by the tragedy, not the tragedy itself. Worse, if the tragedy is perceived as offering powerful confirmation to one’s prior views, or even as a means to promote one’s political agenda, it can seem as if at one level one actually welcomes the tragedy, and covertly finds some satisfaction in it. (Think of the satisfaction in saying ‘I told you so’.)

A related and perhaps even stronger version of this charge is that debate is *disrespectful* to the victims. It might be disrespectful in a very straightforward sense if the cynical reading is correct, since it would mean that those connecting the tragedy to a larger debate are doing this in a purely calculated manner, using the tragedy (and its victims) merely as a means to further their aims (whether or not these aims are themselves commendable). But the worry about disrespect can be understood more broadly, and needn’t involve ascribing any base motive to the targets of the complaint.

It might be thought, in particular, that there is something defective about seeing the tragedy as just an example of some general point—that this is incompatible with responding to the particularity of the disaster, to the concrete harm done to particular people. Instead, the tragedy is treated as evidence for (or exemplification of) some general claim or point, rather than treated as mattering in itself.

There is also, finally, an issue relating to unity. Debate divides us, and means we cannot present a unified front on what we do agree, the horror of the tragedy. Discord can further compromise our common grief by alienating those who may stand to ‘lose’ from the initiation of debate—making them focus not on the loss, but on the ‘loss’ to them, just as it may taint the grief of the opposition by covert satisfaction. Thus—it may be argued—by setting aside a period of ‘pure’ grief we leave space for a proper dignified response to the tragedy.

5.2 Debate, grief and respect

This ethical reading of the worry does have intuitive force. It also has the advantage that it allows us to avoid controversial (and perhaps partly empirical) claims about when deliberation is more or less reliable. Notice also that whereas the epistemic worry was that emotion would compromise debate, now the worry is in the reverse direction: that debate would compromise emotion, get in its way. Not that there is too much emotion, but too little.

We will argue, however, that even this form of the complaint is also unsuccessful.

First, the worry can’t plausibly be that it’s inherently wrong or disrespectful to tie some particular tragedy to something broader. We cannot understand (and respond to) anything without employing some general concepts—there is no such thing as just confronting the unadorned particularity of things. Indeed, a tragedy often only makes full sense against a broader background of events and issues, of which some may inevitably be contentious. That background will often already be political in character (an atrocity may be motivated by political grievance or anger at some policy) meaning

that the tragedy will be ‘politicised’ from the start. And to know *how* to properly respond emotionally to the particular tragedy itself, one needs to know what it means, what exactly happened – a response, for example, to a tragic death that treats it as something entirely generic is itself incomplete and inappropriate. It surely matters here whether the death was due to, say, accident, negligence, random insanity, racial hatred or injustice.

Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, failure to tie a tragedy to the larger issues may itself be disrespectful to the victims, and compromise our emotional response to the event. If the tragedy is due to great injustice, then pure grief may be incomplete, it should be accompanied by anger or outrage. Often the most active campaigners of a cause are those who lost a loved one through an injustice. And sometimes it is actually those closest to the victims who wish to tie to broader debate and draw general lessons from the tragedy.

In other words, by tying an event to something larger, we can increase, rather reduce, its individual meaning. We can make it matter more. (Indeed, notice also that the demand for ‘pure’ grief, focusing on the death and suffering and nothing else, can itself be insincere, and motivated by the desire to block out that larger significance.)

Second, we would be treating the tragedy as a ‘means’ to support some general point even if we referred to it in later debate. But the complaint we are considering is that we shouldn’t start debate too early, not that we must *never* refer to specific tragedies in deliberation and debate.

Now people do occasionally say things that sound like this more radical claim. But the idea that we should *never* connect tragedy to larger debate (as opposed to the very different claim that a particular tragedy doesn’t bear on a particular larger debate) has to be false. For surely great tragedies and disasters are exactly the kind of things we *should* take into account in moral and political debate (so long as this doesn’t prevent us from attending to more mundane, ‘statistical’ harms and evils). But if the complaint here is just that it’s wrong to engage in debate in too close proximity to the tragedy, then it just collapses into the earlier point about leaving enough space for grief.

So let us turn, finally, to the objection that debate compromises grief, and that therefore tragedy should be followed by a period of ‘pure’, unified grief. We have already argued that our affective response to a tragedy will often be incomplete, or indeed compromised, precisely if we do not understand the tragedy in a broader context that will often be contentious. Even setting this important point aside, it’s doubtful that the general public has the same duties of grief that that apply to those directly tied to the victims of a tragedy. And the broader public may have other, more pertinent duties to consider things on a broader scale. It is not just that the victims and those closest to them have different and more demanding affective duties, so to speak. Indeed, we shouldn’t assume that grief (or for that matter ‘respect’) must always get the overwhelming priority, when other important matters are at stake. To the extent that deliberation now rather than later would lead to better outcomes, or would change things for the better (possibly preventing other similar tragedies) then perhaps we, *qua* citizens, should be willing to compromise our grief.

But let us grant, just for argument’s sake, that the general public is indeed called upon to immediately respond to a tragedy with a period of unified grief, and that this requires us to set more contentious matters aside. How long must this pause for grief last? Questions about how long one should grieve, or more generally, feel certain emotions, are hard to answer in any very precise way. Needless to say, grief in response to the death of a loved one should last far longer than a day or two. But

again, it is very doubtful that anything like this is true of the general public. For a model of what national grief may require, we can look to the example of national memorial days, solemn events when everyday politics is set aside. Now memorial days are usually devoted to past events on which there is little or no active debate. But even if we take these as a guide, then the supporter of early debate need only make the concession of a day or so of pause. And such a brief delay may anyway make sense, given the epistemic point about having good enough information to start debate. Yet those objecting to early debate rarely ask for merely a *day's* delay. So even if we were to make this concession it would make little difference to our overall argument.⁸

In our view, then, the ethical reading of the complaint is also unsuccessful. To the extent that there are ethical reasons to postpone debate, these can be opposed by considerations in favour of early debate that are at least as strong. And again, even if you think that the balance of reasons is roughly equal, this should suffice to defend the permissibility of early debate.

5. A Political Argument

5.1. *Debate as a valuable form of political participation*

So here is where the argument has taken us so far. We saw that the epistemic and ethical readings of the complaint are unsuccessful. There are epistemic and ethical considerations both for postponing debate and for starting debate early—and in our view the overall balance tends in favour of starting early, with the added caveats that we shouldn't start debate before we have basic evidence, and that we shouldn't end it too soon.

In the rest of this paper, we shall turn to consider specifically *political* considerations for starting debate earlier.

The basic argument runs as follows:

- (1) Political participation in liberal democracies is valuable.
- (2) Participation in public debate is a particularly important form of political participation.
- (3) Tragedies are often directly followed by a short-lived increase in citizens' engagement in public debate about relevant issues.

Therefore

- (4) There is reason to encourage public debate shortly after tragedies have occurred.

The first premise is widely endorsed in recent political philosophy. In brief, the idea is that citizens' political participation is valuable in liberal democracies because some of the central arguments in favor of democracy require political participation to be as wide as possible. To begin with, given that democracy is rule by the people, the legitimacy of the democratic process is greater the smaller the gap between those who make democratic decisions and those who are subjected to the effects of these decisions (Fine, 2011, Young, 2000, Behnabib, 2004). Moreover, one of the key arguments in support of democracy is that citizens themselves are the best judges of what is in their own interests. Assuming that citizens know best what is in their interests, the more citizens are involved in the political process, the better their interests will be represented. Democracy is thus more likely to promote the interests

⁸ We aren't saying here that public grief must somehow *stop* after such a short period—as we have argued, fitting grief is perfectly compatible with debate. We're only pointing out that *even if* a pause of 'pure' grief were called for, existing practices relating to national grief suggest that it would be too short to support the target complaint.

of the majority (Arneson, 2003). According to another influential argument, democracy is more likely than alternatives to lead to correct decisions and an open and critical assessment of laws and policies (Christiano, 2006). Both arguments revolve around the idea that democracy has distinctive epistemic advantages, advantages that will only accrue if citizens actually participate in public deliberation.

Having said something about the value of political participation, let us turn to the tie between political participation and debate—our second premise. Now political participation has many facets beyond public debate—to mention just some examples, think of voting, campaigning, party membership, and so forth. What is distinctive about public debate is that it allows individuals to test their views, confront opposing evidence and can lead to change of minds. This is because unlike voting or being a party member, public debate forces us to put forward arguments and respond to objections. This is why public debate is a particularly important form of political participation.

This claim is also widely endorsed. For example, Estlund writes that “[w]hatever value democracy is thought to have, it seems inseparable from public political discussion” (Estlund, 2008). This idea is central to some of the main accounts of democracy. In particular, two related conceptions of democracy (epistemic and deliberative democracy) take deliberation to be crucial to the value of democracy (Schwartzberg, 2015). And engagement in public debate is generally recognised as a key civic virtue in liberal democracies (Kymlicka and Norman, 2000).

There is no need to say much to support the third premise, which merely states that tragedies are often directly followed by a short-lived increase in citizens’ engagement in public debate about the relevant issues. We take that to be an empirical claim about the attention-grabbing impact that tragedies have on most of us—something we have already discussed before. When disaster occurs, it is hard to look away. It directly engages our attention and emotions. Confronted with the horror of tragedy, we can’t help but try to understand what made it possible for this tragedy to happen. It is thus one context in which conditions for widespread public engagement in political debate are especially favourable. If public debate were significantly postponed for, it is likely that far fewer people would participate in such later debate. It would be largely a matter for professional politicians, social scientists and commentators, and perhaps to particularly engaged citizens. Not for the general public.

Now we can draw the conclusion of our argument. If political participation is valuable, and public debate is a particularly important form of political participation, then a context which is particularly favourable for political debate should be welcomed rather than resisted. Social norms discouraging (or even prohibiting) debate after disasters would stand in the way of one important form of political participation.

We would be amiss if we didn’t briefly mention that some authors deny that political participation and public deliberation are valuable and that democracies confer epistemic advantages. In particular, it has been argued that deliberative democracy is a naïve ideal as it fails to take into account the widespread ignorance of voters on political matters (see e.g. Somin, 1998; Posner, 2003). One might reply that this sorry state of affairs may itself be the result of *insufficient* deliberative practices. The best answer to voter ignorance might be to reform civil institutions, practices and norms towards greater deliberation (Ackerman and Fishkin, 2004; Talisse, 2004). Setting this aside, there is also the point that political participation arguably also have considerable non-epistemic value, for example, by conferring legitimacy. In any event, it’s sufficient for our purposes that the first two premises of our argument are

widely held. Recall that our question is about the permissibility of a specific *timing* of public debate, not about the permissibility or value of public debate or political participation as such—a question that is obviously beyond the scope of this paper. Neither party to the meta-debate that interests us is denying the importance of debate—the dispute is over whether to hold it early or to postpone it.

In the rest of this paper, we will briefly mention some empirical considerations that might have an impact on our argument, and tentatively sketch a stronger argument to the effect that participation in debate following disaster might even be a political duty. We will then highlight several qualifications before concluding.

5.2. Empirical support?

The basic argument was that political debate is a valuable thing, to be encouraged rather than inhibited. But inhibiting public debate after tragedy seems particularly problematic when we take on board the considerable evidence that political participation in liberal democracies might be in decline (Putnam, 2000; Macedo, 2005; Wattenberg, 2006), and that the average citizen in liberal democracies is badly informed about politics (Caplan, 2007; Brennan, 2011). Norms discouraging debate after disaster would amount to forgoing a unique opportunity to get a disaffected electorate better informed and politically engaged, in a context in which citizens are, according to this empirical evidence, less well informed and less politically engaged than ever before. This empirical point lends additional support to our political argument.

Not everyone agrees that there is such a pattern of decline. Russell Dalton, for example, has argued that, at least in the US, political participation is not generally decreasing: only some aspects of it are in decline (Dalton, 2008). While voting has indeed declined, Dalton argues that this is because citizens today engage politically in others ways: their engagement is more issue-based, and more focused on on-line political activity, consumer boycotts, etc. (Norris, 2002, Zukin et al., 2006). This, however, is still compatible with our argument. If one of the new ways by which citizens nowadays engage politically is via public debate in various medias, then instituting norms that discourage debate after tragedy would still undermine a major way in which citizens currently engage in the political process, bringing about a decline in political participation. In any event, given that political participation generally improves the functioning of democracy, there is no threshold after which participation becomes less valuable. Whatever the level of actual current political participation, increasing it is valuable from a democratic perspective. More is, on the whole, better, and less involves a loss.

5.3. Temporal division of moral labor?

We have so far argued that there are political grounds for encouraging public debate shortly after a tragedy—that this is a way of seizing the momentum, because this is a point in time where citizens are especially *disposed* to engage politically. More specifically, we have argued that, given that public debate is an important form of political participation, there are reasons to encourage early debate after tragedy.

But perhaps something even stronger could be said: we, as citizens, might even have a duty to engage in public debate, a duty that has more clout at certain points in time—including post-tragedy. In the rest of this section, we will sketch an argument to this effect. But note that this argument goes beyond the main argument of this paper. Our main aim has been to argue that public debate immediately following tragedy is *permissible* to those who wish to engage in it. The argument we will

tentatively sketch below goes one step further to suggest that even those who do not want to participate in debate after disaster may have a (defeasible) duty to do so.

The argument is grounded on the general Rawlsian duty to support just institutions (Rawls, 1999, p.99). If liberal democracies are just institutions, we, as citizens, have a duty to support them. And given that, as we saw above, liberal democracies are committed to their core to the value of public debate, supporting liberal democracies might require a degree of engagement in public debate.

This doesn't yet support the claim that, shortly after tragedies have occurred, citizens have a *greater* duty to engage in public debate. In order to make that argument, we need to briefly introduce the idea of a division of moral labour. This idea has mostly been discussed in connection with Rawls's *Theory of Justice*. Rawls has famously claimed that the principles of justice as fairness should apply only to social institutions rather than directly to individuals. This restriction has been claimed to be based in the idea of a division of moral labour (Nagel, 1995; Scheffler, 2005): a restriction of the application of the principles of justice to institutions is needed because this allows individuals to pursue their own personal projects and to focus on valuable small-scale interpersonal projects (Scheffler, 2005).

This is a claim about distributive justice. But the basic point surely has broader application. For liberal democracy to work at all, citizens need to engage politically at least some of the time. We saw already why this is so valuable. However, we can't expect citizens to be engaged in political debate and decision-making all the time. This would be far too demanding. Citizens also have their own lives to live, and personal projects and values to pursue. So while the demands of citizenship should be felt, they must be restricted in some way. This is where it seems reasonable to suggest that some division of moral labour should occur, as citizens cannot give systematic priority to the political duty to engage in public debate. Now there are different ways we could implement such a division of moral labour; the Rawlsian version focuses on the distinction between institutions and individuals. Another promising way to develop the idea of a moral division of labour, we suggest, would be to also apply it at the temporal level.

One obvious way in which political engagement is regulated temporally is via the standard election cycles of liberal democracies, where public debate and political action are clustered with significant gaps in between. Perhaps this is enough. But these gaps can be long and there are often enough political matters of great significance that must be decided and that therefore require debate. And it would seem that *if* citizens need to engage politically beyond the constrained space of the conventional election cycle, then the period following national tragedies that potentially bear on wider political issues would be one natural point in which such engagement could be legitimately expected. To begin with, these are points in time at which, as we saw, the attention and emotions of the general public has already shifted to the national (or international) scale. We have already highlighted the social epistemic advantages of engaging at debate at this point. Moreover, these are often also points in time when political decisions need to be made in ways that can depart from the outcomes of conventional political cycles—e.g. an unprecedented terrorist attack may require policy decisions that couldn't have been addressed by the most recent prior electoral process, or a tragedy may reveal that a specific policy has unexpected consequences. Needless to say, the relevant duty is not absolute. Other considerations—personal, moral, and even political—will outweigh it in multiple contexts. But that is also true of our duty to vote.

We are of course aware that the way we have just developed the idea of a moral division of labour is rather different than the standard Rawlsian formulation, where the division of moral labour is supposed to explain why the principles of distributive justice apply only to institutions and not directly to individuals. Two things could be said in response. First, we aren't taking a stance here about the way the idea of a division of moral labour has been formulated and debated in the different context of distributive justice. We merely argue that, given that citizens have various political duties to fulfil as well as prerogatives to pursue their personal interests, some kind of division of moral labour is also justified at the level of individuals and, if so, we need some way of balancing these political duties and personal interests; dividing things temporally in the way we suggested seems to us a promising solution. Second, locating the dividing line between individuals and institutions has itself encountered forceful criticism (Cohen, 1997; Murphy, 1998). There is therefore nothing bold in the suggestion that, if a division of moral labour is needed, the dividing line needn't always be situated between individuals and institutions.

5.5. Qualifications

We have argued that there is a political case to be made in favour of starting public debate early after disaster—perhaps even a duty to engage in such debate. But we do not wish to overstate things.

To begin with, we do not wish to give the impression that the period following tragedy is the only time where it might be appropriate, or even required, for citizens to engage in political debate outside the election cycle—it is not only in the context of tragedy that critical political choices arise. The findings of a dull policy report may be equally or more important. Conversely, some tragedies, awful as they may be, have little or no broader political or moral significance. Debate is not something that *must* follow every tragedy. Artificially tying a tragedy to some larger debate can be harmful and basing policies on irrelevant tragedies would be even worse. But, to repeat, the relevance of a given tragedy to a given debate will itself typically be a matter for legitimate debate.

Second, our political argument appealed to the empirical fact that there is a short-living increase citizens' engagement with public debate following tragedies. But this empirical fact can also be seen as a problem for our argument. After all, we had earlier argued that while debate should start early, it is important that it shouldn't end *too* early. And it might be thought that this is exactly what would happen if citizens engage in debate following tragedy. Still: a degree of political engagement is surely better than no engagement at all. More importantly, although the political engagement of citizens is valuable and, indeed, arguably a duty, beyond a certain point—after they have given their input—citizens can, and even should, leave the continuation of the discussion, and the working out of specific policy implications, to politicians and professionals. Even if most citizens eventually return to their personal, small-scale concerns, this doesn't mean that the debate itself has ended.

This is not to say that things always work out this way. The outrage that follows a tragedy can be quickly forgotten by both citizens and policy-makers. To pick just one telling example, consider the tragic sinking, in October 2013, of a migrant boat on its way to Italy. Around 360 immigrants drowned in that disaster, and a few days later another migrant boat was tragically shipwrecked. In response to the public outrage that followed these tragedies, the heavily funded operation Mare Nostrum was put in motion to prevent similar disasters in the future. A year later, however, that operation was replaced by operation Triton which had a far lighter budget. Taking place at such a distance from the original tragedies, this policy change

received little public attention and mobilisation. Unsurprisingly, this change of policy was followed by a series of migrant boat sinking during April 2015, leading to the deaths of more the 1200 immigrants in that month alone. This horrific tragedy again led to public attention and outrage, leading EU authorities to reopen discussion of their policies. In other words, without appropriate follow-up at the policy level, the input provided by the short lived public response after tragedy would itself be short lived—leading, in this case, to further tragedy.

Still: the more pragmatic, epistemic and ethical considerations we highlighted above seem to us to add to a strong political case in favour of early debate. For better or worse, postponing debate is tantamount to dramatically reducing public engagement with the relevant issues and lowering the quality of such an engagement. And that is a very significant cost.

5.6. When should debate end?

We have earlier argued that although early debate may have some epistemic drawbacks—due, in particular, to the biasing effects of strong emotion and the danger of exaggerating the weight of what is currently salient—these aren't reasons to postpone debate but rather to make sure that it doesn't end too early. When we later developed our political argument, we appealed to the limited attention span of the public—which is likely to either engage in debate soon after tragedy, or not at all. But it might be objected that when these two points are put together, they generate a dilemma.⁹

The dilemma relates to when debate should end. On the one hand, if emotion and saliency effects bias the outcome of an early end to debate, then we should end it only after these problematic influences have subsided. We should wait until people don't care too much. But this would also mean that people have disengaged from the debate, and its outcome is therefore in the hands of the professional political class. But then it seems that the public debate was a waste of time, and our argument that early debate allows citizens to also get involved in the decision-making loses its force. Worse, to the extent that citizens notice this disconnect between the public debate and the actual outcome, this will foster even greater cynicism.

But if in order to avoid this result we make sure that the debate ends early enough to reflect the active contribution of the public, then it seems that the advice not to end debate too early has been given up, and we face the epistemic risks of jumping to conclusions and of rushed legislation that is biased or ill-defined.

This is a serious challenge. In reply, we will raise a series of points that highlight, and aim to put pressure on, the assumptions that underlie this objection.

First, our political argument appeals to the empirical claim that public attention is short-lived in the sense that if early debate is suppressed, that would mean that far fewer citizens would engage in debate. But it doesn't immediately follow from that that if citizens engage in early debate, they would disengage soon after, nor that that would disengage as soon as the heightened emotion following the tragedy recedes. This does not seem to us generally true. While engagement in debate naturally drops off over time, many individuals who, say, view the tragedy as a great injustice, will continue to be engaged in that issue long after the initial shock and grief is gone. Moreover—and this is a point we'll return to—citizens who had once strongly engaged in such debate will typically be disposed to re-engage in it at later points when, e.g. important new information comes to light.

⁹ We owe this ingenious objection to an anonymous referee.

Second, the objection assumes that early debate will inevitably lead to biased conclusions. But we have already argued that this need not be the case. Early debate may have its epistemic shortcomings but we've also highlighted its advantages, and the shortcomings of more distant deliberation. The thought was rather that we can, to some extent, address both kinds of biases if debate starts early and continues long enough.

Third, there is a common complaint against early debate and social pressure on those who do wish to engage in such early debate. But while, as a matter of fact, many citizens will gradually disengage from the debate, there is no parallel pressure on them to put an early (or later) end to the debate. This marks one important difference between the question of when to start debate and that of when to end it.

Fourth, consider another difference. Whereas—as the target complaint assumes—it is fairly clear when debate starts, when it can be said to end is less clear. The intensity of discussion typically recedes over time. But it can be re-ignited at later points, and some debates continue over years, even decades. How long it goes on can vary greatly depending on the nature of the tragedy, the content of the debate, and many other contextual factors.

Fifth, the objection is ultimately concerned with the upshot of debate rather than its length. But, depending on the specific context, the upshot of such a debate can take multiple forms, including concrete policy decisions or legislation, a formal commission (or multiple such commissions), changes in voting patterns and even longer term cultural effects. What influence the debate has had on any of these, and whether its overall impact was positive, would often be hard to say. Public debate can have an important impact even when immediate policy-making ignores it.

Sixth, the constraints that should govern policy and legislation are different, and unsurprisingly more stringent, than those that should govern public debate. Checks and balances should be in place, and such decisions raise issues of representation, legitimacy and accountability in a form, and to a degree, not paralleled by mere political speech. It is therefore appropriate that, in many cases, the policy and legal upshot of a tragedy don't directly reflect the immediate drift of the debate that followed it, and that this upshot is entrusted to the professional political class. It does not follow, however, that public debate has no influence on that further process. To begin with, the debate will bring into view information, arguments, and considerations that will remain on the table even when the public has moved on. And even if the public had moved on, why assume that the political class will just ignore the drift of that prior debate? Compare: public engagement before a major election is far greater than afterwards, but this hardly means that promises made before an election have no weight later on. Politicians do sometimes ignore their past promises, but that will usually carry significant political risk for them. Ignoring the drift of public debate after a major tragedy is similarly risky from a political perspective. And while public engagement in the issue may subside over time, such perceived betrayal is exactly the kind of thing that will re-ignite it.

It's worth noting here that there will be cases where public debate following tragedy *does* point in biased or even dangerous directions. That there is a gap between such debate and actual policy and that, on occasion, politicians may need to overrule the public consensus is perfectly appropriate. This is not a point against early debate, let alone a demonstration that such debate is generally futile. It is rather a further reason to permit such debate: in a working liberal democracy, there should be checks and balances in place to correct for those cases where early debate has veered off track.

Finally, the value of debate shouldn't be measured exclusively in terms of its direct impact on policy, just as debate before an election isn't pointless even when one's side loses, indeed, even when that loss is a foregone conclusion. There is value simply in being able to express one's view, in engaging with others' arguments, and in finding out more about opposing viewpoints. In addition, the point of debate following a tragedy isn't only to shape future policy but, often enough, also about arriving at an understanding of what has happened (figuring out who's to blame is important even if the political circumstances mean they won't be held accountable).

6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to clarify and assess the common complaint that there is something inappropriate about moral and political debate immediately following national tragedies. We examined both epistemic and moral grounds for this charge and found them wanting. Some of these grounds rely on highly controversial assumptions while others can be easily counter-balanced by opposing—and in our view stronger—epistemic and ethical considerations in favour of starting debate earlier. We did acknowledge that it is often justified to postpone debate until key factual questions are clarified, and that it even may be appropriate to reserve a short period of 'pure' grief following a tragedy. But neither point really supports a significant postponing of debate in most cases. We also highlighted the distinction between the point in which debate is initiated and the point in which it ends—even if it's appropriate to start debate early, we must be careful not to end it too soon. We ended the paper by marshalling distinctively political considerations supporting early debate. First, we presented an argument according to which public debate is a vital mode of political engagement for citizens of liberal democracies, and the period immediately following tragedy is both an opportune and appropriate context in which to promote such debate. Second, we tentatively sketched an argument claiming not only that it would be valuable if citizens engaged in public debate after tragedies have occurred but that citizens might even have a (defeasible) duty to engage in such debate.

To conclude: the complaint against engaging in debate shortly after a tragedy is mistaken. Engaging in such debate is permissible, often a good thing, and may even be a duty.

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