

Toward Intellectually Virtuous Discourse: Two Vicious Fallacies and the Virtues that Inhibit Them

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12 Toward Intellectually Virtuous Discourse

Two Vicious Fallacies and the Virtues that Inhibit Them

Robert K. Garcia and Nathan L. King

Public discourse is ailing. Instead of yielding mutual understanding and respect, our debates are often infected with suspicions, accusations, belief polarization, and ideological entrenchment. One malady is what Richard Lipsky calls the *athleticization of politics*, “the transposition of sports values into political discourse” (1979, p. 29). Martha Nussbaum describes the phenomenon as follows:

When people think that political debate is something like an athletic contest, where the aim is to score points for their own side, they are likely to see the ‘other side’ as the enemy and to wish its defeat, or even humiliation. It would not occur to them to seek compromise or to find common ground . . . with their adversaries. (2010, p. 11)

Unfortunately, the conditions that characterize public discourse often contaminate the classroom as well.

As evidence of the effects of athleticization in the classroom, we offer both a confession and an observation. The confession is that we are wary of discussing extremely controversial topics in the classroom. In fact, we are so wary that we tend to steer classroom discussion away from such topics and sometimes leave certain topics out of a syllabus. So much for the confession. The observation is that many of our colleagues have made similar confessions. But perhaps exculpation is not hard to find: After all, such topics are avoided precisely because it is believed—not unreasonably—that discussing them would produce more heat than light, that discussing abortion, for example, is likely to transform a community of learners into a horde of gladiators.

Although such wariness is understandable, it is also tragic. One aim of education in a democratic nation is the promotion of healthy civic discourse. Another is to prepare students to make valuable contributions to the same. In part, the latter aim is accomplished by providing students with an environment that fosters the intellectual virtues that characterize an examined life. This requires an atmosphere in which the student enjoys the freedom to discover and articulate what she believes, to examine how well her beliefs hang together, and to probe for underlying assumptions and

biases—without the fear that self-disclosure will trigger accusations and pigeonholing from fellow students.

We offer no panacea for the disease of classroom athleticization. Nor do we have a simple prescription that will ensure productive discussions outside the classroom. Nevertheless, we offer some “experimental treatments” for promoting the healthy discussion of controversial issues. In the first two sections of the chapter, we identify and explain two fallacious patterns of thought that often afflict discussions of controversial issues: *assailment-by-entailment* (section 1) and the *attitude-to-agent fallacy* (section 2). In effect, these sections diagnose two diseases of discourse. We conclude each section with practical suggestions—in the form of *thinking routines*—for treating these disorders. We will argue that part of the cure is to be found in the intellectual virtues. In particular, we will explain how the virtues of intellectual *carefulness*, *fairness*, *charity*, and *humility* can inoculate the mind against the fallacies we identify.

1. ASSAILMENT-BY-ENTAILMENT

In this section we draw attention to a mistaken pattern of thinking which is common both inside and outside the classroom. It occurs twice in the following dialogue in which two students—Frank and Judith—are discussing the moral status of abortion.

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? The discussion begins with disclosure but ends with censure. It begins with Frank and Judith sharing what they believe about abortion but ends with each accusing the other of holding a further (and repugnant) belief. 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. The exchange illustrates a twofold dynamic that often hampers the discussion

of controversial topics. The destructive dynamic concerns the belief attribution, which involves both a fallacious inference and a failure of intellectual virtue. We will discuss each of these in turn.

The above belief attributions commit a logical fallacy we call *assailment-by-entailment*. This can be understood as a special type of straw man fallacy—a pattern of reasoning that involves characterizing an opponent’s views so that they appear less plausible than they really are.¹ To see the problem, notice that Frank and Judith engage in belief attribution because of their *unstated beliefs*—specifically beliefs about conditional claims. Consider Frank. He doesn’t explicitly say so, but he believes the following conditional: *If abortion is morally permissible then it is permissible to murder an innocent person*. In their exchange, Frank 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*. This attribution is a mistake on Frank’s part. Although *he* believes the conditional, he has no evidence that Judith does. Thus, his belief attribution—his accusation that Judith believes the conditional’s then-clause—is unwarranted.

Now consider Judith, who makes the same kind of mistake. Her unstated belief is in the following conditional: *If abortion is morally wrong then it is permissible to curtail the rights of women*. 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 fallacy *assailment-by-entailment*. The “entailment” is expressed by 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 comes to discover that Vic believes *P*, but Abe 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 example illustrates, 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 insufficient grounds for *thinking* that Vic does. In fact, in some cases, Abe has evidence that Vic actually *rejects* the repugnant belief. This evidence might be direct, in the form of Vic’s explicit and emphatic rejection of the belief in question;

or it might be indirect, consisting in the evidence that Vic is an educated, morally upright person, and that most such persons wouldn't hold such a repugnant belief.

Most generally, assailment-by-entailment involves failing to mind one's evidence. In this respect, it is similar to many other fallacies. What makes assailment-by-entailment interesting, however, is that it conflates alleged or actual 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). (Of course, if Abe is wrong and (2) is false, he commits *two* errors rather than one. He makes a bad inference *and* employs a false premise in doing so. But we'll leave the second error to the side in order to focus on the first.) To further understand Abe's error, keep in mind that there are different doxastic attitudes one can have toward 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 toward *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.² 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.

Notice that Abe's reasoning to (3) is fallacious *even if* Abe is correct about *P*'s entailing *Q*, and even if *Vic* has good reason to believe that *P* entails *Q*. In some cases in which Abe performs the *assailment-by-entailment* inference on *Vic*, *Vic* may indeed hold incoherent or otherwise irrational beliefs. And in some such cases, Abe may be justified in *taking* (or even *declaring* that) *Vic*'s set of beliefs to be incoherent or otherwise irrational (perhaps, given his other commitments, *Vic ought* to believe *Q*). None of that is under dispute here. The present point is about whether Abe is justified in charging *Vic* with the *specific* crime of believing *Q*. And for reasons just discussed, Abe's reasoning in *that* matter is fallacious.

A logical mistake is part of what goes wrong in *assailment-by-entailment*. A helpful way to describe this logical mistake is that it is a failure of *carefulness*. For whatever else intellectual carefulness involves, it surely requires attending to one's evidence. And in committing *assailment-by-entailment*, Abe fails to do this, blurring together alleged logical entailment and belief attribution while hastily inferring that *Vic* believes something awful.

There is more, however. Abe also fails to exhibit the intellectual virtues of *fairness* and *charity*. More on these virtues in a moment. First, it will help to explain in more detail what we mean by *intellectual virtues*. In general terms, intellectual virtues are *habits* of a well-functioning mind, dispositions that make for cognitive excellence. As understood here, intellectual virtues are cognitive character traits that involve a motivation for intellectual goods like true belief, knowledge, and wisdom. As character traits, intellectual virtues are typically *acquired* via training and inculcation—they aren't "hard-wired."³ Further, as character traits, intellectual virtues differ from faculties (e.g., vision) and skills (e.g., mathematical proficiency). These latter features help explain why intellectually virtuous agents are admirable. They have to *work* to achieve their virtue (unlike someone born with good vision). And their character traits involve their deep and fundamental commitments in a way that mere skills typically do not. In addition to intellectual carefulness, fairness, and charity, such mental habits include humility, honesty, firmness, courage, perseverance, and open-mindedness.⁴ With this general understanding of the intellectual virtues in place, let's consider fairness and charity in particular.

We can begin by comparing these intellectual virtues with their moral counterparts. The difference between behaviors characteristic of intellectual

fairness and charity is akin to the difference between two familiar moral principles:

SILVER RULE: Don't do to others what you wouldn't have them do to you.

GOLDEN RULE: Do unto others as you would have them do to you.

The Silver Rule, well known across religious and secular moral traditions, is a negative imperative ("don't do X") that corresponds to our notion of moral fairness. The Golden Rule, predominant in the Judeo-Christian tradition, is a positive imperative such that, if we obey it, we both fulfill and go *beyond* the requirements of the Silver Rule. Fulfilling the Golden Rule, it is often thought, suffices for the expression of moral *charity*.

This analogy, though just a start, helps us to see at least this much: In moral matters, to be charitable is to go *beyond* fairness. It is to give to another more than he or she deserves, and to do so virtuously. With this point in hand, we can unpack the concepts of *intellectual* fairness and charity—as we'll see, a similar point applies in the intellectual realm.

As a provisional way to put the difference between intellectual fairness and charity, we may say that intellectual *fairness* is a matter of *not* treating the views of others as *less* plausible than they actually are, while intellectual *charity* is a matter of treating the views of others as plausible as one reasonably can—even if doing so requires improving upon the views others *actually* hold.

It will help to focus on the specific intellectual activity of interpreting others' views.⁵ In carrying out this activity, we act with intellectual *fairness* when we refrain from interpreting others' views as less plausible than they really are. Being disposed to refrain in this way is central to possessing fairness as a character trait—fair agents are disposed to refrain from unfair intellectual acts. They act fairly toward others in the midst of intellectual activities. A fair agent does not treat her discussion partners in ways she would not wish to be treated (as concerns intellectual endeavors). Further, because she exhibits *intellectual* fairness, the agent with this trait will tend to act fairly for the sake of intellectual goods like true belief, knowledge, and wisdom, where these goods concern both her interlocutor *and* the issue under dispute. A thinker who is intellectually fair avoids acting unfairly in part as a consequence of a general concern for the truth and related goods. This general concern leads to a motivation to hold true beliefs about his interlocutors (and so avoid unjustified belief attributions about them) *and* to seek the truth about the disputed issue. With respect to the latter, the intellectually fair agent will not (say) dismiss a view because a poorly developed version of it is implausible. To dismiss a view for such a reason is to exhibit disregard for truth—after all, a more plausible version of the view may lurk nearby.

Whereas intellectual fairness requires that one refrain from rendering another person's views as less attractive than they really are, *intellectual*

charity requires more. In interpreting others' views, we act with *charity* when we interpret those views so as to make them seem as plausible as we reasonably can, even if this requires "massaging" those views in order to improve them. We don't merely avoid attributing to others positions that are less plausible than the ones *actually* held. Rather, we seek the most plausible versions of our interlocutors' views, where this sometimes requires making "friendly amendments" to those views. Further, we do this both for the sake of those interlocutors and for the sake of the truth. Such charity is intellectually virtuous in part because it ensures that all parties to a dispute become familiar with the most plausible available alternatives. It helps to ensure *informed* selection from among competing views and helps us avoid rejecting the spirit of a view on the grounds that many renderings of its letter are implausible.

An example may further clarify the distinction between fairness and charity. Consider a student discussing the moral status of physician-assisted suicide. Having cited a number of utilitarian considerations, the student concludes, "So we can see that allowing physician-assisted suicide achieves the ideal of Mill's principle of the greatest happiness for the greatest number." The professor sees that this is a patently inaccurate reading of Mill, and so is faced with a choice. She can treat the student with mere fairness or she can treat the student with charity. As a way of doing the former, she might opt for a dead literal interpretation and then criticize the student on the grounds that "the greatest happiness for the greatest number" is both an inaccurate portrayal of Mill and an inherently problematic phrase. (She might point out that the "greatest happiness" part pulls against the "greatest number" part—if one distributes scarce goods so as to produce the greatest happiness for a given individual, then there's less to go around for everyone else.) Having left the student's *expressed* argument in shambles, the professor might move on to the next topic for discussion. However, instead of treating the student with mere fairness, she could say something like this:

I see what you're after, though your portrayal of Mill's principle needs a bit of nuance. If we employ Mill's principle accurately in this context, we'll need to say that an action is right in proportion as it tends to promote happiness (or pleasure) and wrong in proportion as it tends to promote unhappiness (or pain).⁶ And you make a good case that the policy you recommend appears right, given that principle. Now let's talk a bit more about the details of your argument.

The professor who pursues the latter route is taking occasion to improve her student's view while preserving its spirit. Though she is correcting the student, she is doing so by providing an amendment to which the student will be amenable. In exercising charity, she's doing this in part for the student's sake—she's helping the student avoid an important error and inch toward the truth. It is good (epistemically) *for the student* that she does this.

It is also good (epistemically) for the rest of the class and for the professor herself. Her charitable interpretation is part of a process that allows all involved in the discussion to see the most plausible argument that a utilitarian can put forth on the issue. Thus, her charity is distinctively intellectual inasmuch as it aims at epistemic goods.

Let's return to our discussion of *assailment-by-entailment* in order to see how this fallacy involves failures of intellectual fairness and charity. Recall the exchange between Frank and Judith over the morality of abortion. For his part, Frank attributes to Judith the belief that it is permissible to murder an innocent person. But surely this attribution is unfair and 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 attributes to her a belief that is (likely) less plausible than the one she actually holds; further, he fails to attribute to her view as much plausibility as he reasonably can. After all, several alternative interpretations of Judith's position are readily available. Among them: Perhaps 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 *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 can act in step with intellectual virtue 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 with intellectual fairness and charity. Judith attributes to him the belief that it is permissible to curtail women's rights. But, again, this attribution is unfair and 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—she treats his views as less plausible than they really are, a failure of fairness that implies a failure of charity. 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 *doesn't* believe that it is permissible to curtail women's rights. And so on. For Judith, acting in step with intellectual virtue would involve refraining from the belief attribution; moreover, she can do so without acting out of step with her evidence.

As already suggested, thinkers who possess the intellectual virtues of carefulness, fairness, and charity will characteristically avoid committing the *assailment-by-entailment* fallacy. Intellectually careful agents are disposed to consider whether their evidence supports the claim that their dissenters hold repugnant beliefs. And intellectually fair and charitable agents are disposed to avoid attributing repugnant beliefs to others—at least when more friendly attributions are reasonable. When such agents exercise good cognitive character, they will avoid committing the *assailment-by-entailment* fallacy.

Of course, it's one thing to understand how virtuous thinkers act, and quite another to be disposed to act in those ways. For example, when students lack the intellectual virtues, their character won't help to save them from vicious thinking. So, it's important to say something about how the virtues may be acquired, or at any rate, about how students can more often behave in ways virtuous thinkers would behave, even *before* these students actually acquire the virtues.

Recent work on *thinking routines* is helpful to this end. In his book *Intellectual Character* (2002), Ron Ritchhart notes several features of so-called "thinking routines." These are routines involving thinking that: (i) consist of a few steps; (ii) are easy to teach and learn; (iii) are easily supported; (iv) can be used repeatedly in a number of different contexts; and (v) are explicitly geared toward helping those who practice them become better thinkers. One such routine is "Claim-Support-Question" (or CSQ). When students apply this routine, they isolate the *claim* under consideration; they then examine the *support* that has been provided for the claim; finally, they ask *questions* (e.g., they ask to what extent the support for the claim is adequate).

The link between thinking routines and intellectual virtues is simple: By using thinking routines, students engage in cognitive behavior that approximates that of excellent (virtuous) thinkers. As author and educator Philip Dow explains, "Thinking routines serve as an important bridge connecting our everyday thinking with intellectually virtuous aims."⁷ Thinking routines, in other words, can help foster students' acquisition of intellectual virtues by enabling students to *practice* the thinking patterns of intellectually virtuous thinkers. And even in cases where students don't finally acquire the virtues, thinking routines can help students more often think in characteristically virtuous ways.

With this in mind, we suggest two thinking routines that are especially relevant to avoiding the *assailment-by-entailment* fallacy. Because both routines ask students to consider the logical link between claims and supporting evidence, they can be regarded as sitting on the "scaffolding" of the CSQ

routine. Indeed, the first suggested routine is a strategic application of CSQ. In the context of controversial discussions, these routines should foster cognitive behaviors characteristic of a careful, fair, charitable thinker.

- *Attitude or Entailment?* When they are tempted to attribute a repugnant belief to a classmate (or when they have already done this), students should be asked to consider the attitudes they are attributing to others, along with the grounds for those attributions. They should isolate a *claim* (e.g., so-and-so *believes* murder is permissible), and *question* the *support* for that claim (e.g., that so-and-so is pro-choice, a position which a pro-life student may take to have a repugnant entailment). For instance, the students may be invited to ask a question of the form: How might someone accept the antecedent of a conditional but not its consequent (and so not the conditional itself)? The distinction between belief attribution and logical entailment provides further help here, and instructors can introduce that distinction. Perhaps students merely have grounds for thinking that a dissenter's belief *entails* the repugnant claim. Once students see this, the debate becomes less personal. It becomes more about testing for logical entailments and less about pinning problematic beliefs to one's classmates.

Attitude or Entailment can be combined with a second routine—one that is especially appropriate once logical entailments become the focus of discussion:

- *Real or Apparent Entailment?* If a student thinks that his dissenter's belief entails something repugnant, instructors may ask the student to consider inviting his dissenter to discuss whether or not the entailment holds. For example, Frank and Judith might be invited to discuss the following questions: *Does the pro-life view really entail that it is permissible to curtail women's rights?* And, *does the pro-choice view really entail that it is permissible to murder innocent people?* Perhaps the relevant beliefs only *appear* to have the repugnant entailments. For students to act in ways characteristic of carefulness, fairness, and charity, they should at least consider these possibilities, and this may advance their discussion.

Of course, there are many additional ways of helping students avoid the *assailment-by-entailment* fallacy, just as there are many more ways of fostering intellectual virtues. The routines just described are simply two clear, concrete ways of helping students move toward intellectual virtue and away from a fallacy that plagues many classroom discussions. We'll return to the idea of thinking routines below. But first, we want to name and shame a second fallacy that often arises in debates over controversial issues.

2. THE ATTITUDE-TO-AGENT FALLACY

Having committed the error of assailment-by-entailment, we can make ourselves vulnerable to further bad inferences. More specifically, we can 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 what remains, such inferences will be dubbed *attitude-to-agent* inferences.

Let's return to the abortion example to illustrate such an inference. 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. But one can 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 logical gap between *she believes such-and-such* and *she is a so-and-so*. That is, an isolated claim about a person's propositional *attitude* does not justify a negative evaluation of the person *herself*.⁸ Below, we will say more about the nature and folly of this kind of mistake. And we'll draw upon recent research in social psychology to show that the attitude-to-agent fallacy is dangerous for an additional reason: We're easily tempted toward it. But first, let's consider another example.

Comedians Kate Smurthwaite and Steve Harvey recently made headlines for their controversial remarks about people who hold religious views opposed to their own. In a heated discussion on the British TV debate show *The Big Questions*, Smurthwaite (an atheist) quipped, "Faith by definition is believing in things without evidence. And, personally, I don't do that because I'm not an idiot."⁹ Lest you think only atheists are capable of such bluster, 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.

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 inference is good if its premises fail to provide good evidence for its conclusion. There is, in short, a large logical chasm between a single belief 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 gap—it is to be hoped—we'll be less prone to fall into it.

The above attitude-to-agent inferences are 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 Harvey's inference:

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

CONCLUSION: Kate is an idiot.

Harvey doesn't define what he means by "idiot"—definitions aren't his strong suit. But he seems to take the term not to convey some sort of general disdain (as would, say, "jackass"), but rather to connote some sort of *cognitive* defect (perhaps ignorance or close-mindedness or dogmatism). But taken this way, the premise of Harvey's argument not only fails to *force* us to the conclusion, by itself, it doesn't even point us in that direction. 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 likely to believe falsely if one infers that Kate is an idiot. One should not draw this inference—at least not without further evidence. (Parallel remarks apply to Smurthwaite's theist-to-idiot inference.)

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* infer 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.¹⁰ Consistent with this, Steve might nevertheless admire Kate's intellect *on the whole* and assume that she is sincerely seeking the sober truth.

Crucially, this line of thought is right *even* if Steve knows he and Kate have all the same evidence. But why think he's in position to know this? And why think that *we* will often be in a good position to think that we and our dissenters share the same evidence? To put it tersely, it can be difficult even to grasp the contents and workings of our own minds. It is very often more difficult to grasp the contents and workings of someone else's.¹¹ This counsels even further caution about making the inference from what someone believes to a general and negative assessment of her intellectual character. For if we aren't sure what evidence our dissenter has, we're very poorly placed to make a judgment about whether her belief is rational *given* that evidence—let alone to make a judgment to the effect that she's an irrational or intellectually vicious *person*. One mistake does not an idiot make.

Two analogies may help amplify this point. 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. This point is especially apt when it comes to certain controversial topics. Here, such inferences are more like thinking someone is clumsy because he fails a difficult parkour flip. Just as such acrobatics place humans at the edge of their physical abilities, discussion of controversial issues in religion, ethics, and politics places us at the edge of our cognitive limits—which is all the more reason to insist on fairness and charity in these contexts. Here is the take-home point: At least without further evidence, we're unjustified in making inferences from another agent's doxastic attitudes (she believes P) to negative attributions regarding the agent herself—that she's dumb or wicked or treacherous.

It's worth noting that the *attitude-to-agent* inference is something like the reverse of an *ad hominem* argument. In a typical *ad hominem*, one moves

from a negative assessment of a dissenter—“she’s biased or uninformed or stupid” to a claim that the dissenter’s belief is false—“she’s wrong about X.” In an *attitude-to-agent* inference, one moves from what one takes to be an erroneous belief to a negative assessment of another’s character. It is uncontroversial that the first maneuver is a logical mistake—there’s a large logical gap between premise and conclusion. But as should be clear, the second sort of inference is also fallacious. It is not as though the logical gap shrinks when one tries to jump from the other direction.¹²

What makes an attitude-to-agent inference dangerous isn’t merely the fact that it’s careless and unwarranted—though that would be bad enough. It’s also *unfair* and *uncharitable*. In the context of assessing another person’s intellectual character, *fairness* requires that one refrain from attributing to another a character that is worse than it reasonably seems, given one’s evidence. *Charity* requires that one actively seek to attribute to another the best cognitive character one reasonably can, given one’s evidence. But then, clearly, moving straight from *she and I disagree* to *she’s an idiot* is neither fair nor charitable. Inferring the latter claim from the former should be our last resort. It is a move to be made only after we have explored and eliminated alternative attributions that are consistent with the fact that our discussion partner holds a contrary view. To sum up intellectual fairness in this context: We *wouldn’t* want others to perform a negative attitude-to-agent inference on us, so we shouldn’t perform this inference on them. To sum up intellectual charity in this context: We *would* want others to perform the most winsome assessments of our intellectual character that they reasonably can, so we should perform this assessment on them.

As we’ve seen, the attitude-to-agent fallacy should be avoided 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.¹³ 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. And while this vulnerability may make such inferences *understandable*, it does not make them *epistemically justifiable*.

One well-known mechanism that can lead to poor inferences 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.”¹⁴ 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, because he’s not drunk *all* the time, 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 thought 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 unwarranted¹⁵—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 protect 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 virtuous 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. 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 human tendency toward what psychologists call *fundamental attribution error*.¹⁶ 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 bump into a table, we’re apt to characterize him as *clumsy*. If we ourselves bump the table, well, it was poorly placed and the room was too small. Likewise, if we notice that someone is nervous before singing in public, we’re prone to characterize her as a nervous *person*. If we ourselves are nervous prior to a performance, 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 commit the one, there's reason to think we're prone to commit the other.¹⁷

We'll close this essay by showing briefly how the intellectual virtues of carefulness, fairness, charity, and humility can help avert the attitude-to-agent fallacy, and by suggesting some thinking routines that may help students engage in more intellectually virtuous ways.

First, the above *attitude-to-agent* inferences suggest a lack of mindfulness about the link between a claim (she *is* a so-and-so) and the evidence invoked to support it (she *believes* such-and such). Normally, characteristically careful agents will not commit errors of this sort. Likewise, when the cause of a disagreement can be explained without attributing bad character (for example, when it can be explained by a dissenter's error in evaluating evidence), a fair thinker will refrain from attributing bad character to her dissenter. And a charitable thinker will actively seek to cast her opponent's intellectual character in the best reasonable light.

When it comes to the *attitude-to-agent* inference, it almost goes without saying that exercising fairness and charity curbs the fallacy and leads to better discussions. After all, fair, charitable people tend not to call an interlocutor idiotic or dangerous simply because they espouse a different view. And it's not as though it would take *much* to improve discussions in which people do engage in such name-calling. A dab of fairness and a dash of charity can improve the quality of such discussions significantly. Moreover, the exercise of these virtues 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 consider 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. Intellectual *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 unfair 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.

But again: Learning that the virtues benefit those who possess them is of little help to those who *don't* yet have them. Those in *that* group need help—help in eventually acquiring the intellectual virtues and in more often thinking like virtuous thinkers in the meantime. The following applications of the CSQ thinking routine are among the resources that may help:

- *Attitude or Agent?* Students who are tempted to attribute to a dissenter (agent) a vicious *character trait* should consider whether they have good grounds for this. In particular, they should *question* whether their only *support* for this attribution *claim* is their dissenter’s *attitude* toward the proposition under dispute. If it is, then the corresponding inference is unjustified.
- *Alternative Explanations:* As a supplement to *Attitude or Agent*, students should consider alternative (non-character-based) explanations for their dissenter’s belief. For example, perhaps the dissenter simply made an error on this occasion, or perhaps she’s perfectly rational, after all—perhaps *the student making the attribution* has made the mistake.
- *Argue the Opposite:* Students who hold a position on an issue can be assigned to argue in favor of the opposite of their position. So, for instance, if a student supports a pro-choice position on abortion, he or she may be required to argue for the pro-life view (and vice versa). This sort of assignment—doubtless in use by many professors—allows students to enter sympathetically into their dissenters’ views. It thereby fosters intellectual fairness and charity.

Regular practice with these routines can dispose students to stop and evaluate the support for claims that their dissenters are idiots, moral monsters, and the like. The routines thereby foster intellectual carefulness and do so in a way that leads students to consider the possibility that those with whom they disagree are worth taking seriously. In other words, the routines foster carefulness in a way that also fosters fairness, charity, and humility.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The athleticization of the classroom makes it difficult for educators to provide an atmosphere in which students can engage in mutually beneficial and constructive dialogue. We have identified two patterns of thought that

frequently contribute to this difficulty—the *assailment-by-entailment* and *attitude-to-agent* fallacies—and have shown how damaging these fallacies can be, both to public discourse and to classroom discussions. These fallacies eat away at the quality of our discussions like a cancer; thus, they demand a cure. We have suggested that the intellectual virtues of carefulness, charity, fairness, and humility are part of this cure. Those who possess these virtues are largely inoculated from the fallacies, and even those who are still vulnerable to the fallacies can lessen their effects by seeking to inculcate the virtues. We have suggested several thinking routines that can be employed to this end, including *Attitude or Entailment?*, *Real or Apparent Entailment?*, *Attitude or Agent?*, and *Alternative Explanations*. It is our hope that the use of such routines, together with an increased mindfulness of the above fallacies, might help to foster genuine self-understanding, mutual understanding, and healthy civic discourse.¹⁸

NOTES

- 1 Not all instances of the *straw man* fallacy are instances of *assailment-by-entailment*. In general, one commits a *straw man* when one characterizes the position of one's dissenter so as to make it seem less reasonable or attractive than it really is. That is, one attributes to the dissenter a less reasonable or less attractive view than she really holds and does so for the sake of discrediting that position. However, in the case of *assailment-by-entailment*, one does this in a very subtle and specific way: Namely, one starts with a belief a dissenter *actually* holds. One then adds a claim about what that belief entails, where this claim may or may not be true, and may or not be believed by one's dissenter, and where the consequence of the conditional is something *repugnant*. One then attributes the corresponding repugnant belief to one's dissenter. As the examples of *assailment-by-entailment* in section 1 make clear, to reason in this way is to commit a kind of *straw man* fallacy—for it is a way of making an opponent's beliefs seem less reasonable than they really are. Thanks to Walter Sinnott-Armstrong for helpful discussion here.
- 2 Even in the case where Vic believes P and Vic believes that P entails Q, it *still* doesn't follow that Vic believes Q. Belief is not closed under logical entailment.
- 3 Some epistemologists—"virtue reliabilists"—understand intellectual virtues as reliable (truth-conducive) innate cognitive faculties, such as good vision and good reasoning. We have no objection to this terminology, nor to the idea that "faculty virtues" play a key role in a complete virtue epistemology. We view our project, which focuses on so-called "character virtues," as complementary to the work of virtue reliabilists. For prominent expressions of virtue reliabilism, see Sosa (2007) and (2009), and Greco (2010). For discussion of the relationship between faculty virtues and character virtues, see Baehr (2011, ch. 4).
- 4 For further discussion, see especially Roberts and Wood (2007).
- 5 The discussion of intellectual charity in this section benefits from that of Roberts and Wood (2007, pp. 73–78).
- 6 Mill (2001, p. 7).
- 7 Dow (2013, p. 132).
- 8 Of course, if one has information about a person in *addition* to knowing that he believes the isolated claim, *then* one may be justified in moving from a

claim about what someone believes to a negative assessment of his character. If I know that you're a well-educated, modern adult who has thought long and hard about the issue, and *then* learn that you believe sex slavery is permissible, I have reason to think that your character is morally suspect. But in a way, such a case illustrates the point to be made in this section: For in the case just described, I don't move from an *isolated* claim about your belief to a negative assessment of your character. The additional information about your education and social setting are doing crucial evidential "work" in the inference. But in that case, the inference isn't an *attitude-to-agent* inference of the sort under discussion.

- 9 It is possible to see something like *assailment-by-entailment* in Smurthwaite's comments. For present purposes, we leave this to the side.
- 10 For a detailed development of this line of thought, see Thomas Kelly (2005). 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, Feldman (2006) and Christensen (2009). See also the essays in Feldman and Warfield (2010), Machuca (2013), and Christensen and Lackey (2013). For a book-length introduction to the epistemology of disagreement, see Frances (2014).
- 11 For more on this point, see King (2012).
- 12 Thanks to Keith Wyma for helpful discussion here.
- 13 See the discussion of Abelson's work in Thomas Gilovich (1991, pp. 85–87).
- 14 Aronson and Tavris (2007, p. 13). Festinger (1957) is the seminal work on dissonance theory.
- 15 On this, see Christensen (2009).
- 16 See Ross and Nisbett (1991).
- 17 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 Sabini, Siepmann, and Stein, 2001). 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.
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