Disagreement and Contemporary Political Philosophy
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Introduction
Does affirmative action constitute reverse racism? Would classrooms be safer if teachers had guns? Does the death penalty deter murder? Is global warming going to be catastrophic if we don't take immediate action? Should hate speech be outlawed?

These questions, along with many others, provoke strong disagreement. Political opponents cannot agree on matters concerning the economy, foreign affairs, education, energy, health care, the environment, privatization, and immigration. In the United States, nearly half of all Republicans and Democrats say they "almost never" agree with the other party's positions (Doherty et al. 2016). And it is not just ordinary citizens who disagree, but experts and politicians, too. When it comes to politics, there seems to be no end to the number of issues over which people disagree.

Disagreement is a ubiquitous feature of politics, but is that a bad thing?

According to Jean Jacques Rousseau, widespread disagreement is evidence that the state is in decline. Rousseau claims that extensive disagreement is a symptom of citizens' lack of commitment to the common good, and that one of the jobs of political philosophy is to solve the problem of disagreement (1762, Book IV: Ch.II). Others deny this. John Rawls (1993) argues that reasonable disagreement is inevitable in any free society. That is, we should expect values and preferences to differ in a pluralistic society, and reasonable citizens will understand that people of goodwill can disagree about moral and political issues. According to Rawls, political disagreement is symptomatic of a free, pluralistic, tolerant, healthy democracy. If this is correct, then we should neither expect nor want to resolve many political disagreements, at least when they concern reasonable but incompatible perspectives.

In this chapter, I will discuss the nature and value of political disagreement, with reference to contemporary work in political philosophy. I will attempt to answer the following questions: Why do we disagree? Is political disagreement a good thing? Do we have a duty to disagree? Should we expect consensus or mere compromise in politics? When is civil disobedience a justified way to express disagreement with the law? Is consensus a threat to democracy?

Why Do We Disagree?
Disagreement is a ubiquitous feature of political life, but why is that? A common explanation is that people have different *fundamental values*. In the opening lines of *Democracy and Disagreement*, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson announce that, "Of the challenges facing American democracy today, none is more formidable than the problem of moral disagreement. Neither the theory nor the practice of democratic politics has so far found an adequate way to cope with conflicts about

fundamental values" (1996, 1). Similarly, Robert Talisse writes, "We are divided over our most fundamental moral commitments. We disagree about moral basics, and accordingly disagree about the precise shape that our politics should take" (2009, 3).

While this explanation seems plausible, it has a serious shortcoming: it is unlikely that fundamental values such as freedom, equality, privacy, and so forth are not widely shared across political divides. While it may be common for people to accuse their political opponents of not respecting specific values, it is implausible that others typically lack these fundamental values (see Pew 2018). As Aaron Ancell writes, "Almost no one genuinely hates freedom or has no concern for equality. Indeed, the fundamental values at stake in most political disagreements—values like freedom, equality, security, privacy, human wellbeing, and so on—are shared by almost everyone" (2017, 7).

A more plausible explanation of political disagreement is that people have different *value priorities*. That is, we largely agree about fundamental values, but we disagree about how to prioritize or trade off such values when they conflict. (A closely related explanation is that people have different *value specifications*: they agree on fundamental values at an abstract level, but they disagree about how to interpret or apply these values.) As Rawls writes,

> In being forced to select among cherished values, or when we hold to several and must restrict each in view of the requirements of the others, we face great difficulties in setting priorities and making adjustments. Many hard decisions may seem to have no clear answer. (1993, 55)

According to value pluralists, it is hard to adjudicate conflicts between values because the values themselves are "qualitatively heterogeneous and cannot be reduced to a common measure of value" (Galston 2002, 30). Value monists reject this idea. They claim that all values can be reduced to a common measure, such as pleasure. I will not try to resolve this meta-ethical debate here. I simply want to emphasize that it is difficult to satisfactorily resolve disagreements when moral values seem to conflict.

Disagreement about values is one common explanation for political disagreement. Another explanation is *disagreement over non-moral facts*. According to this view, what appears to be a value-based disagreement often arises from a disagreement about non-moral facts. For example, two people may disagree about the merits of a new immigration law because they disagree about the extent and harms of immigration.

Why do people disagree about non-moral facts when we have access to more information than ever? The standard answer is that the relevant facts are difficult to know. In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls argues that the evidence bearing on political issues is often "conflicting and complex, and

thus hard to assess and evaluate" (1993, 56). Ancell nicely illustrates this idea by reflecting on the debate about capital punishment:

> People on either side of this debate often disagree about whether the death penalty deters violent crime. And the evidence about whether it does so is indeed mixed. So it is plausible that the difficulty of determining whether the death penalty deters violent crime is one of the primary causes of disagreement about the merits of the death penalty. (Ancell 2017, 17)

This is just one example, but the point generalizes. Politics is complex, and a vast range of non-moral facts will likely bear on almost any political issue. As Arthur Lupia says, "the number of facts that can be relevant to the operations of government is infinite" (2016, 2).

We have now considered two explanations of political disagreement. According to one explanation, political disagreement typically stems from diverging values or value priorities. According to another explanation, political disagreement is usually the consequence of disagreement about the relevant non-moral facts. The conventional view in political theory is that political disagreement is caused by one, or a combination of, these two factors (Ancell 2017). Citizens have different moral values or value priorities, which lead to different conclusions about which laws and policies are morally desirable. They also have different understandings of the relevant non-moral facts because the evidence bearing on such facts is complex, conflicting, and open to interpretation.[1] Despite being the standard explanation for political disagreement in contemporary political philosophy, it is less than fully satisfying for two reasons.

First, it cannot explain why people disagree about non-moral facts for which the evidence is well-established. In politics, there is widespread disagreement even about non-moral facts for which the evidence is clear, unequivocal, and easy to access. For example, people routinely hold false beliefs about key economic indicators like inflation, unemployment, or economic growth. People also disagree about issues such as vaccine safety and climate change, despite the existence of well-established facts. To illustrate, 69% of Democrats say that climate change is caused by human activity compared to only 23% of Republicans (Ancell 2017, 46), even though there is near universal scientific consensus on the issue. Why do people disagree about non-moral facts for which the evidence is well-established?

Second, the standard explanation cannot explain why so many people hold their political views with great confidence. If people disagree about political issues because the evidence is "complex, conflicting, and difficult to evaluate", then why don't people hold very tentative opinions or even

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[1] It is also plausible that differences in values or value priorities may explain some disagreement about the non-moral facts. If we selectively interpret information and filter evidence in ways that fit with our antecedent values (see Gilovich 1993 for an overview), we may end up disagreeing about what the non-moral facts are. However, this explanation is less plausible in cases where the evidence is clear, unequivocal, and easy to access, as I will discuss below.

suspend judgment? When the evidence is equivocal and the answer is not obvious, people typically do not hold beliefs with great confidence. Yet many people find their political views to be *utterly obvious* and are confused or frustrated when others disagree.[2] (It is possible that people simply *do not know* that political issues are complicated. But this requires an explanation for why people would find their own political views obvious, especially when (a) the evidence for many of these issues *is* complex, conflicting, and open to interpretation, and (b) a large number of citizens---and sometimes experts---disagree with them.)

Instead of appealing to divergent values or disagreement over non-moral facts, an increasingly popular idea is that political disagreements are rooted in our *partisan identities*. That is, people tend to believe whatever favors their political side, which leads to widespread, persistent, and often antagonistic disagreement. Ancell calls this the 'tribal rationalizers account' of disagreement, which he summarizes as follows:

> People's political views are grounded in their partisan allegiances and social identities. Partisanship is usually inherited and typically not based on prior ideology or policy preferences. People adopt the political views that comport with their partisan allegiances, help them fit in with their social group, or reflect their prejudices toward outgroups. Since people begin with different partisan allegiances and belong to different social groups, they adopt different and often opposing political views. People then interpret and weigh values and facts in whatever way fits their pre-existing views, often simply parroting party-supplied reasons that provide an illusion of understanding. This results in further disagreement about how to interpret and weigh both values and non-moral facts. (Ancell 2017, 85-6)

If the 'tribal rationalizers account' is correct, then people do not typically decide which politicians or parties to support on the basis of their values and beliefs about the facts. Instead, the vast majority of people will *first* align themselves with a political coalition and *then* adjust their beliefs and values to align with their preferred party or candidate.[3] There is a growing amount of evidence for this view. Scholars of contemporary political theory are thus increasingly studying the ways in which political disagreement is bound up with group loyalty and social identity (see Lenz 2012; Achen and Bartels 2016; Brennan 2016; and Mason 2018).

So far, we have examined three common explanations of political disagreement. These theories have highlighted the role of different moral values, factual beliefs, and social identities in explaining

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[2] See Friedman (2019) for a discussion of 'naive realism' in politics. According to Friedman, many democratic citizens mistakenly assume the truth is self-evident, so they wrongly conclude that their political opponents are ignorant, irrational, or immoral.

[3] An alternative explanation is that voters are using a heuristic whereby they know that their party agrees with them on many issues (or shares many of their values), so they use group membership to determine what to think about other issues. Lenz (2012) tested this hypothesis and found little evidence for the heuristic theory.

why political disagreement is widespread, persistent, and antagonistic. In the next section, we consider the possible benefits of political disagreement.

The Value of Political Disagreement

A common view is that political disagreement is something we must live with. In liberal societies, we cannot expect citizens to agree on many political matters, even when they engage in rational, open-minded, respectful debate. When people are free to use their own reasoning faculties to determine their beliefs and values, they will end up endorsing incompatible moral, political, and religious views. Still, this may be something to lament rather than celebrate. Why think disagreement in politics is a good thing?

First, it is important to recognize that not all debates will be irresolvable. We can expect at least some political disputes to be resolved. The focus on political division downplays the large area of commitments that do have common ground and where at least partial resolutions are possible.

Second, convincing others of the truth of one's opinion is not the only motivating reason to publicly disagree with others. Political disagreement can serve other functions. For example, it can produce tolerance for the views of others, express mutual respect for fellow citizens, and promote a willingness to compromise. As Robert Talisse writes, "it is in the processes of exchanging arguments, voicing criticisms, and responding to objections that we come to see each other as reasoning and reasonable agents" (2009, 148). We may come to regard those who deeply disagree with us as reasonable and sincere participants in the common moral task of trying to do the right thing. This may foster respect and tolerance of deep differences, as well as promote civic engagement, strengthen faith in democratic institutions, and make people better citizens overall (Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Mansbridge 1999; and Mutz 2008).

To achieve these ends, our disagreements must be *civil*. We must enter into deliberation in good faith, presume our opponents are equally well-motivated, and assume they are trying to act at least partly on principle to accomplish what they believe is in the common good. When people shout, talk over each other, and hurl insults back and forth, this damages public trust (Funk 2001, Mutz 2015) and undermines "the relationships of respect that are necessary to sustain any morally justifiable democracy under the modern conditions of deep and persistent disagreement" (Gutmann and Thompson 2014, 35). Uncivil disagreement violates a much-valued norm in politics.[4]

There are also *epistemic* benefits of deliberation and disagreement. When we disagree with others, it can make us more informed, make our views more rational, deepen our understanding of the complexity of contested issues, and alter our opinions in truth-conducive ways. As J. S. Mill writes, deliberating in public about political issues is good for a democracy because it affords citizens "the

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[4] The value of political civility has been questioned in recent years (see Zamalin 2021).

opportunity of exchanging error for truth" and the chance of acquiring a "livelier impression of truth." For Mill, deliberation is a vital mechanism through which individuals improve and develop their political ideas, without which their "mental development is cramped" (1859, 21 & 39).

A variety of contemporary political philosophers have further defended the epistemic value of political disagreement (e.g., Bohman 2006; Estlund 2009; Landemore 2012; and Peter 2013). In the literature on deliberative democracy, which is largely about deliberative disagreement, it is commonly argued that deliberation is valuable on epistemic grounds (see Min and Wong 2018 for an overview). When citizens reason together about politics, they have opportunities to weed out false beliefs, acquire true beliefs, and recalibrate the reasons for their beliefs. Under certain conditions, collective deliberation involving multiple perspectives is even said to be more accurate than deliberation involving experts alone (Landemore 2012).[5] As I'll discuss in the next section, dissent may also reveal actual and incipient social problems, improve society's pool of information, and make it more likely that important issues will be addressed.

While exposure to disagreement may have epistemic benefits, there may also be non-instrumental reasons to listen to others. Perhaps we should attempt to understand the perspectives of others simply to be good citizens, i.e. to show respect and compassion for our fellow citizens. If so, then we would also have a non-instrumental reason to listen to political ideas that we disagree with, and even dislike. To the extent that we want to participate in politics, we may even have a democratic *obligation* to listen to the other side (Morgan-Olsen 2013), whether we like what they have to say or not.

A Duty to Disagree
If political disagreement is morally and epistemically valuable for individuals and society, then perhaps we have a *duty to disagree*. In his recent book, *Why It's OK to Speak Your Mind*, Hrishikesh Joshi argues that we each have a duty to speak our minds, even at the risk of blowback. He writes,

> Whenever there is social pressure to refrain from revealing some evidence we have, I contend, we should take ourselves to have a duty to reveal that evidence—it is in this sense that we have a duty to speak our minds. (Joshi 2021, 37)

According to Joshi, speaking one's mind is essential for the sake of the common good. Intellectual conformity produces 'blind spots' that warp our understanding of the world and prevent human flourishing. If we conform our judgment to others, we fail to disclose what we actually know or believe, and thus we may deprive society of important information (see also Sunstein 2003).

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[5] For criticisms of epistemic defenses of deliberative democracy, see Somin (2013); Muirhead, (2014); Schwartzberg, (2015); Urbinati (2015); Brennan (2016). Others who claim that disagreement can be epistemically disvaluable include Sunstein (2000) and Hedden (2017).

Dissenters perform a crucial public service, often at their own expense, by alleviating society of blind spots.[6]

The duty to speak your mind is a moral duty, not an epistemic duty. It is also a *prima facie* duty, meaning it is not decisive in every context (Joshi 2021, 37). If speaking your mind is likely to get you killed, you are not obligated to speak up. Morality would be too demanding if we were required to speak our minds even in the face of death, job loss, or significant harm. We should, however, be willing to "lose some standing amongst [our] social group" (Joshi 2021, 38). As is often the case with moral duties, we must forego narrow self-interest for the sake of the collective good.

The duty to speak your mind is also an *imperfect duty*: it allows for "discretion and latitude" in application (Joshi 2021, 40). After all, we would not be able to function in the real world if we had to speak our minds (i.e. share our evidence) in every context. That, too, would make morality too demanding. Thus, the duty to speak your mind does not yield a determinate prescription about when it must be fulfilled. We can pick our battles. Also, the duty must be performed *in good faith* (Joshi 2021, 44). It is possible to share genuine evidence in ways that mislead others (e.g. by sharing only a selection of one's evidence). To prevent people from meeting this duty while intentionally making the epistemic position of others *worse*, we must limit the duty to those who intend to improve rather than deteriorate the epistemic situations of others. Further, the duty to speak your mind kicks in "only when the matter at hand is of sufficient importance" (Joshi 2021, 40).

According to Joshi, the duty to speak your mind is a special case of the more general imperfect duty to *improve the epistemic commons*. The 'epistemic commons' is Joshi's term for the stock of evidence, ideas, and perspectives that are alive for a given community. Speaking your mind is important for the common good, according to Joshi, because we enhance our collective ability to reach the truth if we share evidence and offer different perspectives. This explains why there is normative pressure to disagree with others. If we allow social pressure to stifle the free expression of ideas, it will create dangerous blind spots that distort our understanding of the world. To prevent these blind spots, we must foster a healthy epistemic commons that tolerates a diversity of opinions. Thus, we each have an ethical responsibility to preserve and promote a healthy epistemic commons.

Along similar lines, Jennifer Lackey (2020) argues that we have a 'duty to object'. We have an obligation to speak out against assertions that we take to be false or unwarranted, especially when they are potentially harmful to others or oneself. The duty to object is also an imperfect duty; otherwise we would need to spend all our time objecting to what is said at home, work, on Twitter, Facebook, etc. According to Lackey, the duty to object is grounded in both moral and epistemic

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[6] Joshi also argues that you should speak your mind for your own sake. He claims that dissent is necessary to develop your rational faculties and exercise intellectual independence, both of which are essential for living a good life. I will set this argument aside, but see Hannon (2022) for a criticism.

reasons. A good moral agent will speak out against assertions that are likely to cause harm, especially when the cost of speaking up is low. But the corrections we offer to others need not be tied to any moral considerations. The duty to object may also be grounded in epistemic reasons. In particular, it plays a vital role in contributing to the "flourishing of the epistemic community" (Lackey 2020, 43).

Consensus and Compromise
Although disagreement is a vital, abiding feature of contemporary democracies, it is important that we at least try to resolve our disagreements. Presumably, the ideal resolution to political disagreement is *consensus* (Habermas 1989; Barabas 2004). A consensus is not just an outcome where all parties agree but rather is an achievement produced by reflection and deliberation. It requires a process of being mutually convinced by reasons. To illustrate, suppose there were some magic serum that, once put into the water supply, would immediately make your political opponents agree with you.[7] Should you do it? Presumably, there is something wrong about manipulating people into agreeing with you. To abandon rational persuasion in favor of manipulation would undermine the moral authority of an agreement. The goal is not simply to secure agreement by whatever means necessary, but to reach an agreement as the outcome of reasoned, collective deliberation---that is, to achieve a *genuine consensus* (Adams 2005).

Nevertheless, it is unreasonable to expect political disagreement to fully dissipate, to be replaced with consensus, at least not without some repressive imposition of one viewpoint. As Talisse writes, "stable and enduring political unanimity should be viewed with suspicion. We should regard widespread uniformity of political opinion as evidence that opposing ideas and critical voices are being suppressed" (2021: 56). The circumstances of politics are such that a genuine agreement will normally be out of reach. But if consensus is unachievable, how should we settle our disputes?

When full consensus is not an option, we must aim to resolve our disagreements another way. The two most normatively appealing alternatives to rational deliberation are *voting* and *compromise* (see Cohen 1989; Habermas 1996; Manin 1987; and Gutmann and Thompson 1996). In a democracy, we typically settle disagreements by voting on what we each take to be the best available outcome. We may use deliberation to identify the range of available options, but we switch to majority rule as a fair way to settle disagreements among people who are unable to reach consensus. Even theorists who defend deliberative conceptions of democracy typically accept that deliberation is unlikely to end in agreement, so a switch to voting (or some other such decision mechanism) will be required.

We may also seek *compromise* as a way to resolve political disputes. Compromise is a different activity from consensus and has different goals. With consensus, the parties aim to dissolve their disagreement through reasoning and reflection, whereas in compromise they aim to manage their

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[7] I borrow this example from Lynch (2012).

conflict through give and take (O'Flynn and Setälä 2020). A compromise is roughly an agreement in which all sides sacrifice something of value in order to achieve a better outcome than failing to agree on anything. Compromise is less ideal than consensus because it leaves all parties dissatisfied to some extent. But compromise is necessary in a well-functioning democracy. As Edmond Burke said,

> all government, indeed every human benefit and enjoyment, every virtue, and every prudent act, is founded on compromise and barter. We balance inconveniences; we give and take; we remit some rights that we may enjoy others; and we choose rather to be happy citizens than subtle disputants. Compromise is not only necessary to politics, but it is also thought to be virtuous. (2005, 222)

In short, we cannot have a healthy democracy without compromise. Yet compromise is incredibly difficult; it often feels like a betrayal to the principles we deeply value. While people are fond of compromise in some policy areas (e.g. taxes, minimum wage, and trade policy), they are less willing to compromise on moral issues (e.g. abortion) or family values (Wolak 2020).[8]

In politics, elected officials are typically the ones involved in the business of hammering out compromises. But the public's attitudes may inform whether elected officials are willing to pursue compromises.[9] If voters do not want their representatives to compromise, then party leaders may adopt an uncompromising mindset in order to avoid any backlash among their most politically active and informed supporters (Gutmann and Thompson 2012, 20). This may lead to polarization and gridlock in politics.

It is because political disagreement is fundamental and inescapable that we ought to value compromise as a way to resolve our differences. It represents an agreement where both (or many) sides are willing to make concessions for the sake of other gains that otherwise would not be possible. It also symbolizes a particular sense of reciprocity and mutual respect for those with whom we reasonably disagree.

In some circumstances, however, any resolution of the impasse will strike at least one of the parties as "a capitulation, a surrender, a rotten concession to injustice" (Talisse 2021, 123). If the injustice is egregious enough, it may warrant civil disobedience---as I'll discuss below.

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[8] As Adam Carter pointed out to me, a possible drawback of the compromise strategy---which we find in some European governments, e.g., in Scandinavia---is that in cobbled together coalition governments, disproportionate power often falls to the moderates. This occurs even in widely divided societies where the moderates are not very representative of the electorate.

[9] There is a debate about the extent to which voters value compromise. According to Gutmann and Thompson (2012), the American public favors compromise in principle but not in practice. In contrast, Wolak (2020) argues that people do generally value compromise, even in practice, as a way to resolve political differences.

Civil Disobedience

In a democracy, you can't always get what you want. A large number of political decisions will be enforced, through the use of coercion if necessary, against morally competent and intellectually reasonable citizens who disagree in good faith with those political decisions. This gives rise to *the problem of political legitimacy*. How can we legitimately make political decisions and enforce them on reasonable dissenters while also respecting the freedom and equality of all citizens?

The answer, roughly, is that we create democratic rules and procedures to resolve our political differences in fair ways. When citizens and elected officials follow these rules and respect procedural fairness, it reinforces the legitimacy of our political system, even when we regard particular outcomes as mistaken or even unjust. As Talisse writes,

> According to the democratic ethos, we must also judge it *right* that our reasonable opponents have an equal political say, even though we assess their views as incompatible with justice. And when they prevail politically, we must regard it as legitimate for democratic government to enact their will. (2021, 64)

In other words, we typically accept losses in a democracy because we can at least agree on the relevant procedures and processes. This allows us to achieve political stability despite widespread disagreement. We respect the process by which political outcomes are achieved, even if we do not agree with the outcomes themselves.

Yet, we may sometimes regard an outcome as so unjust that we cannot choose to abide by it. For example, an abortion ban may compel physicians to endanger their patients in an ethically unacceptable way. If physicians believe the law is unjust, they may take it to be their ethical responsibility to violate the legal requirement. Likewise, a government may enact profound injustices such as disenfranchisement, denial of religious liberties, or systematic failure to extend legal protections against rape, murder, or kidnapping to all citizens. In such cases, we may take the outcome to be *illegitimate*, even though it may have resulted from a legitimate procedure. What method of recourse do we have in these situations?

One option is to *rebel*, that is, to engage in acts of violence, threats, destruction of property, or terrorism, and to resist legal punishments for these crimes. These rebellious acts are rarely, if ever, seen as legitimate in a democracy. A more widely accepted response to an unjust law is *civil disobedience*. In his book on civil disobedience, William Smith defines it as "a public, non-violent, conscientious yet political act, contrary to law, carried out to communicate opposition to law and policies of government" (2013, 3). Unlike rebellion, civil disobedience is 'non-violent' in that it avoids bringing about or threatening physical harm to others and damage to their property. It is also 'public' in the sense that civil disobedience is carried out openly without attempts to escape arrest.

Civil disobedience is an important weapon in the armory of citizens. It is not only a symbolic way to express profound disagreement with an unjust law, but also an effective means to generate publicity for oppositional arguments. For this reason, political theorists have argued that we should tolerate and even support civil disobedience (see Dworkin 1978, 217-22; Habermas 1986, 99; Rawls 1999, 339). Yet, it is unclear precisely when civil disobedience is morally justified. Is it only legitimate in response to laws or policies that are clearly and substantially unjust? Also, it is uncertain how a democratic state should respond to civil disobedience. On the one hand, civil disobedience is unlawful and violates the moral requirement that citizens abide by the outcomes of democratic process. On the other hand, we now celebrate many campaigns of civil disobedience, such as those associated with Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. This makes it difficult to determine how democratic authorities should respond to the actions of civilly disobedient citizens.

Agonistic Democracy
In contemporary political philosophy, it is commonly assumed that consensus is the ideal solution to political disagreement. But this view is not uncontroversial. According to some theorists, the real threat to democracy is not *conflict* but rather *consensus*. Those who defend this idea are called 'political agonists'.

Chantal Mouffe (2000, 2005) is a leading contemporary advocate of political agonism. According to Mouffe, conflict and disagreement are at the heart of politics. She contrasts the agonistic theory of democracy with the deliberative models defended by Rawls (1993) and Habermas (1996), both of whom emphasize the importance of consensus. Rawls acknowledges that people living in a free society will inevitably hold irreconcilable moral, religious, or philosophical doctrines, but he nonetheless envisages an "overlapping consensus" on principles of justice that underwrite a political community's basic social institutions. For Rawls, we must relegate our controversial moral, religious, and philosophical beliefs to the private sphere, as these beliefs cannot serve as a legitimate basis for political justification. When pluralism is relegated in this way, it becomes possible for reasonable and rational citizens to share a conception of justice, says Rawls. Habermas likewise regards rational consensus as the foundation for political legitimacy. As Mouffe writes, "Rawls and Habermas want to ground adhesion to liberal democracy on a type of rational agreement that would preclude the possibility of contestation" (2000, 92).

Agonistic pluralists reject such consensus-based models of democracy. We should not view conflict and disagreement as regrettable features of political life that we must try to reduce or bear grudgingly. Instead, we should see disagreement and division as vital features of pluralistic democracies. This is distinct from the earlier claim, made by Talisse, that we should be *epistemically* worried by the appearance of consensus (as it may suggest that opposing ideas have been suppressed). Mouffe's point is stronger: agonism is valuable in its own right. Political conflict

indicates that democracy is alive and inhabited by pluralism, and pluralism is something we should celebrate and enhance. This also points to a criticism of Rawls and Habermas. In their own way, each theorist provides a strategy to achieve consensus by attempting to escape the inescapable fact of conflicting values. By focusing on consensus, however, Rawls and Habermas fail to make room for "genuine pluralism" (Honig 1993, 130).

To illustrate, consider Rawls' suggestion that we relegate our controversial moral, religious, and philosophical doctrines to the private sphere. In doing so, Mouffe claims that political liberalism only pays lip-service to the 'fact of pluralism' but does not value pluralism in itself. To postulate the availability of a public sphere of deliberation where a rational consensus could obtain, one negates the inherently conflictual nature of modern pluralism. According to agonistic pluralists, it is a dangerous illusion to think that power and conflict could be dissolved through rational debate, as well as to think that political legitimacy could be based on rational agreement. As Mouffe writes, "We have to accept that every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power, and that it always entails some form of exclusion" (2000, 104). Instead of encouraging citizens to bracket their moral, religious, and philosophical disagreements, agonistic democrats suggest that we cultivate oppositional yet respectful civic and political relations and practices.

If contemporary society is best understood as contested and deeply divided, this has important normative implications for how to understand democracy. For example, we should not regard political decisions as legitimate to the extent that they achieve a rational consensus. This would overlook the fact that politics is constituted through power, that antagonism is inevitable, and that every agreement is an expression of hegemonic power and thus unstable. For these reasons, agnostic pluralists maintain that the deliberative ideal of consensus must be rejected. Under conditions of pluralism, there could be no political justification in the usual sense, but only the attempt to "domesticate hostility" (Mouffe 2000, 27). As a result, political theorists ought not be concerned with how to reach a fully inclusive consensus, nor with how to negotiate a compromise among competing interests, but rather with how to manage conflicts for which no rational solution could ever exist. According to Mouffe, the main task for democracy is to convert antagonism into *agonism*, to make enemies into adversaries, and to turn fighting into critical engagement.

It might be, however, that agonistic democracy and deliberative democracy are not fundamentally at odds. A key assumption in this debate is the binary opposition between consensus and contestation, which we might question. As Schaap writes,

> it is not obvious why acknowledging consensus as the ideal outcome of rational deliberation entails the denial or suppression of conflict. For deliberative democrats readily recognize that consensus is rarely achieved in practice. While consensus is an ideal that actually

existing democracies inevitably fail to realize, it may nonetheless serve as a critical standard by which to judge the legitimacy of democratic decision-making. (2006, 258)

In other words, the deliberative model's theoretical framework may be able to accommodate political contestation without embracing contestation for its own sake. This criticism is echoed by Brady (2004), who argues that deliberative theory actually *facilitates* the development of the agonistic approach to democratic theory and practice. Knops (2007) likewise argues that Mouffe's agonistic model of democracy is not only compatible with, but indeed presupposes a deliberative framework. Hence, we need not valorize political disagreement in its own right, but we should regard it as a symptom of a healthy, functioning democracy.

Conclusion

Political disagreement is endemic to democracy. Is that a bad thing? We have seen several arguments for thinking that it is not. Political disagreement can promote toleration, indicate a willingness to compromise, lead us toward the truth, and improve the epistemic commons. Nonetheless, these benefits occur only if citizens disagree civilly and in good faith. Unfortunately, these conditions are not always met. This should be unsurprising, given that a promising explanation of political disagreement appeals to tribal partisan identities. Compromise and voting are often the only options in the face of such intractable disagreement, but partisanship can render compromise on some issues both infeasible and unattractive. Unless we must find ways to engage openly and honestly across our deep political divides, however, democracy will founder.

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