

## Political Persuasion is *Prima Facie* Disrespectful

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Abstract: Political persuasion can express moral respect. In this article, however, I rely on two psychological assumptions to argue that political persuasion is *prima facie* disrespectful: (1) that we maintain our political beliefs largely for non-epistemic, personal reasons and (2) that our political beliefs are connected to our epistemic esteem. Given those assumptions, a persuader can either ignore the relevant personal reasons, explicitly address them, or implicitly address them. Ignoring those reasons, I argue, constitutes *prima facie* insensitivity. Explicitly addressing them constitutes a form of *prima facie* incivility. Finally, implicitly addressing them covertly treats those personal reasons as psychological puppet strings, constituting *prima facie* objectionable manipulation. This *prima facie* insensitivity, incivility, and manipulation are each *prima facie* failures of respect, either for the persuadee's rationality or for their agency. Political persuasion can sometimes be all-things-considered justified, but these moral hazards can produce reasonable guilt, resentment, and blowback.

In recent decades, psychologists and communication theorists have made significant progress in understanding persuasion. This is a good thing. It is hard to imagine humanity overcoming the challenges of (e.g.) the climate crisis, racial injustice, or economic injustice without people substantively changing each other's minds through an exchange of reasons. If persuasion is necessary to mitigate disaster, then it has a clear consequentialist justification. Some of the most forceful proponents of large-scale persuasion, however, appeal to the traditionally non-consequentialist value of respect. For example, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson write that "mutual respect demands... constructive interaction with... the persons

with whom one disagrees.”<sup>1</sup> Such mutual respect, Gutmann and Thompson claim, underlies “the most basic activities in the kind of democratic politics to which a healthy democracy aspires: sharing one’s political point of view with one’s fellow citizens in an effort to persuade them at least of its reasonableness, and potentially of its rightness.”<sup>2</sup>

My aim in this paper, however, is to show that considerations of respect can count *against* political persuasion, so that political persuaders must navigate certain moral hazards. More specifically, I argue that, when it comes to many political topics, attempted persuasion will be at least *prima facie* disrespectful, such that there is a defeasible presumption against attempting it. Morally speaking, the argument hinges on two broadly Kantian ideas: (1) that interfering with others’ agency (including their mental agency<sup>3</sup>) is *prima facie* disrespectful and (2) that it is *prima facie* disrespectful to treat an interlocutor as anything other than a fellow rational being (as in, e.g., psychologizing away their beliefs<sup>4</sup>).

Though I focus on respect in my argument, I do not assume respect encompasses all of morality. Hence, nothing in my argument entails, and I do not believe, that political persuasion is therefore generally impermissible – if I had to pick a label, I’d say I’m pro-persuasion, and I reject the slogan that everyone is entitled to their own beliefs. But even when persuasion is needed and permissible (based on respect or on other values), I believe that there is often a “moral remainder”<sup>5</sup> or “moral residue”<sup>6</sup> which supports certain reactive attitudes and generates duties of repair.

My argument is framed in deontological terms, but has implications for consequentialist approaches as well. In the United States, at least, respect is widely regarded as an important value, across political divides.<sup>7</sup> That suggests that even apparent disrespect will generate resistance and potential blowback. It is therefore worth figuring out when persuasion involves real or apparent disrespect, especially subtle forms of disrespect that well-meaning persuaders can easily overlook. Even when disrespect is ultimately warranted, recognizing the moral subtlety can help persuaders weigh the costs appropriately and adjust their expectations. In other

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<sup>1</sup> (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 79).

<sup>2</sup> (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 181).

<sup>3</sup> For one relevant discussion, see (Birks & Douglas, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> See (Flowerree, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> See (Hursthouse, 1999, p. 44).

<sup>6</sup> (Thomson, 1990, p. 84)

<sup>7</sup> See (Tyson, n.d.).

words, a consequentialist political persuader often has to pick their moral poison, and manage its aftereffects.

The argument I offer here complements other cautionary arguments about communicative influence. Iris Marion Young argues that the Millian ideal of deliberative democracy, in which progress occurs through the free and fair exchange of ideas, cannot be realized when institutions and political discourse exclude key stakeholders.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Kristie Dotson argues that patterns of testimonial quieting and smothering prevent some knowers – especially those from oppressed groups – from speaking or being heard.<sup>9</sup> Arguments like Young’s and Dotson’s can be understood in terms of failures of respect, even if that is not how they are framed. In a more explicitly deontological vein, Lynn Sanders argues that contingent but pervasive social conditions make mutual respect hard to realize through rational deliberation.<sup>10</sup> My argument has a different focus, however, and applies to exchanges between a wider range of individuals, including those who are comparably well-positioned socially. In this regard and others, my argument is closest to (and largely inspired by) the work of George Tsai and Regina Rini.<sup>11</sup>

Three points of terminology. First, in talking of *respect*, I’m interested in what Stephen Darwall calls “recognition respect”, broadly understood as showing appropriate regard for certain objects or facts.<sup>12</sup> An action is *prima facie* disrespectful when it has features that, in the absence of defeating factors, make it disrespectful. Adopting a distinction from epistemology, we can say that some defeaters are *undercutting*, while others are *rebutting*.<sup>13</sup> An undercutting defeater partly or wholly removes the disrespect, leaving less or no respect-related reason against engaging in persuasion, whereas a merely rebutting defeater leaves those reasons in place. Fully-informed, rational consent is plausibly an undercutting defeater: if, with full understanding of the potential outcomes, I rationally consent to you persuading me by any means possible, then it may be permissible for you to use underhanded rhetorical tricks. By contrast, merely rebutting defeaters always leave a moral remainder or (in traditional Kantian terminology) a ground of

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<sup>8</sup> (Young, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> (Dotson, 2011). See also (Alcoff, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> (Sanders, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Especially (Rini, 2018, 2020; Tsai, 2014). Like Rini and Tsai, I bracket various concerns about non-ideal environments in which attempted persuasion often occurs, such as social media. For a stronger moral skepticism about persuasion than either mine or Tsai’s, see (Price, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> (Darwall, 1977)

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., (Pollock, 1986).

obligation.<sup>14</sup> For example, if consequentialist considerations ultimately justify you in using lies to persuade me, then you would still have some respect-based reason not to do it, and may owe me an apology if you go ahead with the lies. Moreover, if I discovered the lies, I would have some reasonable basis for resentment.

Second, in talking of *persuasion*, I mean to describe the activity of offering reasons or encouraging reflection on reasons with the aim of significantly changing someone's beliefs through their rational appreciation of those reasons, whether or not that aim is realized. This sense of "persuasion" differs slightly from everyday usage, on which persuasion occurs only when the aim is successfully realized. However, the broader, success-neutral sense of the term is common in the philosophical literature.<sup>15</sup> I use "persuaders" for agents who aim to change others' beliefs, and "persuadees" for the targets of their persuasive activities. Importantly, I do not limit persuasion to cases in which someone *provides* reasons<sup>16</sup> – persuasion in my sense can also occur by pointing out the implications of antecedently recognized reasons. This paper itself is meant to be an exercise in such dot-connecting persuasion, since my empirical and ethical assumptions will be familiar to many readers.

Third, though I frame my argument in terms of 'political' persuasion, that term only approximately fits my topic. On the one hand, the argument does not apply to some exchanges we call "political" – e.g., dispassionate, non-partisan debates about legislative procedures. On the other hand, the argument does apply to some exchanges that are not straightforwardly political – e.g., certain religious and sub-disciplinary disputes (such as that between 'analytic' and 'continental' philosophers). Finally, even within squarely political exchanges, the beliefs a persuader aims to change need not have an overt political or moral content, and so include what Rini calls merely "politically relevant" beliefs.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See (Herman, 1996)

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., (Tsai, 2014, p. 78) and (Rini, 2018, p. 2). This usage differs from that of some psychologists, however, who take persuasion to be about changing evaluative attitudes (instead of beliefs) through means that may or may not involve reasons (e.g., using merely associative techniques to shape consumer preferences). See, e.g., (Petty & Wegener, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. (Rini, 2018, pp. 2–3). Nor do I take providing reasons to be sufficient for persuasion – one could provide reasons in (e.g.) a debate without *aiming* at significantly changing another's mind.

<sup>17</sup> (Rini, 2017). In addition, the moral hazards I identify may also appear in non-persuasive contexts, such as education about racism – see (Warren, 2013).

The specific range of cases in which I believe any attempt at persuasion is prima facie disrespectful are those in which the persuadee's beliefs are central to subjects' identities, in the specific sense of having two features:

**Commanding Personal Value:** A belief has commanding personal value if its subject actively or passively maintains it largely for non-epistemic, 'personal', reasons.<sup>18</sup>

**Epistemic Esteem:** A belief connects to a subject's epistemic esteem if either the subject or people in their social circles takes the subject's maintenance of that belief to demonstrate that subject's competence in identifying and rationally assessing epistemic reasons.

A belief's connection to epistemic esteem could be classified as a kind of personal value, but it will be useful to treat it as a distinct feature. It is an empirical question how many people's beliefs have either feature, and to what degree.

In §1 and §2, I offer grounds for thinking that a wide range of beliefs have a significant degree of commanding personal value and a strong connection to epistemic esteem. In §3, I lay the groundwork for my main argument by distinguishing two types of respect: respect for rationality and respect for agency. My main argument appears in §4 as a trilemma. According to the trilemma, any attempt to persuade someone out of a belief with those features will, prima facie, involve one of three forms of disrespect: insensitivity (when one ignores the commanding personal value), incivility (when one explicitly addresses the commanding personal value, at the expense of the subject's epistemic esteem), or manipulation (when one implicitly addresses the commanding personal value in order to persuade, avoiding insensitivity or incivility, but acting like a psychological puppeteer). Though I claim that the disrespect in all these cases is only prima facie, I also note why the factors that would defeat the disrespect are often out of reach. In §5, I briefly consider ways that persuaders might respond to trilemma.

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<sup>18</sup> I stay neutral on how to distinguish epistemic from non-epistemic reasons. As an approximation, though, epistemic reasons are all and only those that speak in favor of the truth of a belief. My argument applies to self-serving beliefs as well as beliefs maintained because of self-destructive psychological drives (e.g., in cases of severe depression). Hence, my use of "personal" instead of "prudential."

## 1. Commanding personal value for political beliefs

Many psychologists and philosophers agree that non-epistemic factors shape our moral and political beliefs. For example, merely aesthetic qualities of an electoral candidate's last name might make us more inclined to believe that they're qualified for office, but aesthetic qualities are themselves not good reasons to believe that.

For a belief to have commanding personal value, however, personal, non-epistemic factors must do more than psychologically explain why a subject holds that belief. Those factors must also be normative reasons in favor of maintaining the belief. Dan Kahan offers one example: people sometimes incorrectly evaluate someone's expertise based on whether that person's testimony aligns with the defining beliefs of the evaluators' social group (e.g., other members of their family, neighborhood, or religious community).<sup>19</sup> According to Kahan, even if this evaluative approach consistently leads to false beliefs, it need not be a failure of rationality. This is because it helps meet subjects' more pressing needs:

Nothing an ordinary member of the public does... will have any effect on the risk that [e.g.] climate change poses... But given what positions on these issues signify about the sort of person she is, adopting a mistaken stance on one of these... could expose her to devastating [social] consequences, both material and psychic. It is perfectly rational under these circumstances to process information in a manner that promotes formation of the beliefs on these issues that express her group allegiances.<sup>20</sup>

Kahan may be exaggerating in suggesting that such responses involve *perfect* rationality. Regardless, I am interested in cases that involve only a *moderate* degree of reason-responsiveness: a subject maintaining a belief largely for personal, non-epistemic reasons. A belief could have commanding personal value even if it were an epistemic rational failing for the subject not to align their beliefs solely with their epistemic reasons.

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<sup>19</sup> (Kahan et al., 2011).

<sup>20</sup> (Kahan, 2017), which draws on (Anderson, 1995). One might ask: why can't someone just *fake* a belief in order to preserve her social connections? That surely happens in some cases, but since faking is psychologically demanding, faking adds strain to someone's psychological economy – something they have (non-epistemic) reason to avoid.

*Maintaining* a belief includes a wider range of activities than those involved in forming a belief. Belief-maintenance includes considering standard belief formation and updating through evidence and arguments. Yet it also includes broader activities related to inquiry, all of which profoundly impact which beliefs we have. That includes directing our perceptual attention, teasing out the implications of some beliefs instead of others, asking others to confirm our understanding of what they said, and deciding which epistemic communities to spend time in.<sup>21</sup> Someone could *form* a belief for purely epistemic reasons, but later *maintain* it primarily for non-epistemic reasons – for example, someone who formed a belief about a historical issue based on a college class, but now passively maintains that belief in virtue of its practical insignificance. For that reason, the claim that beliefs have commanding personal value is compatible with the claim that those beliefs are formed and updated purely for epistemic reasons, as on some descriptive Bayesian accounts.<sup>22</sup>

What (epistemic) reasons are there, then, for thinking that many of our beliefs have commanding personal value? The idea that our political beliefs are central to our identities has become almost a platitude, and many researchers who affirm that platitude posit specific personal values that drive belief-maintenance. The most commonly invoked personal values are those Kahan mentions: social connections and social identities.<sup>23</sup> Other psychologists argue that, on an individual level, we desire to attain and maintain a positive view of ourselves – as competent, good, and coherent – and that this shapes how to deal with a range of incoming information.<sup>24</sup> Still other social psychologists argue that, especially in the face of persuasive messages, we must be cognitive misers, engaging our (rational) faculties only when we have a clear motivation for doing so.<sup>25</sup> Finally, and most controversially, some psychologists argue that we maintain our moral and political beliefs because they provide us with ‘symbolic immortality’ that helps us manage our anxiety about death.<sup>26</sup> In my terms: these psychologists suggest that

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<sup>21</sup> See (Friedman, 2020) on how such ‘zetetic’ norms diverge from familiar epistemic norms.

<sup>22</sup> For a relevant critical discussion, see (Mandelbaum, 2019).

<sup>23</sup> Based on their review of the empirical literature, Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels conclude that “[e]ven among unusually well-informed and politically engaged people, the political preferences and judgments that look and feel like the bases of partisanship and voting behavior are, in reality, often consequences of party and group loyalties” (Achen & Bartels, 2017, p. 268).

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., (Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Steele, 1988).

<sup>25</sup> See (Petty & Wegener, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> (Greenberg & Arndt, 2012)

much political belief-maintenance is driven by personal reasons concerning social connections, self-image preservation, cognitive economy, and existential anxiety management.

To be sure, the replication crisis in the social sciences should make us wary of relying heavily on this empirical work. Even so, at least some of these claims have held up to challenges, even claims that focus narrowly on belief-formation, instead of maintenance more broadly. For example, one recent high-powered replication of Kahan’s work found a “robust effect” of social identity (and so of personal values) on people’s ability to evaluate evidence.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, in perhaps the most successful recent attempt to show that information can rationally change people’s political views regardless of their political alignment, the investigators go to lengths to avoid cues concerning group identity.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, those empirical studies all involved scenarios in which volunteers engaged with information in controlled environments, and we would expect personal value to shape belief-maintenance even more in less artificial contexts.<sup>29</sup>

That said, there are other reasons for caution here. Even if many beliefs have some personal value, it could be that the relevant non-epistemic reasons are weak in many cases, and so are not the primary drivers of belief maintenance. In a different vein, it may be that some of these putatively non-epistemic considerations can be understood as manifestations of less obvious epistemic rationality, from either an epistemological<sup>30</sup> or a metanormative perspective.<sup>31</sup>

While recognizing this potential complication, I will assume for the remainder of the paper that *many* political beliefs have commanding personal value, again emphasizing that maintenance includes much more than belief formation. Insofar as that commanding personal value generates a common moral hazard (as I will argue it does), the generic claim that political beliefs have commanding personal value may be warranted – even without knowing exactly what proportion of our political beliefs are commanded by that personal value.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> (Stagnaro et al., 2023, p. 3). See also (Connor et al., 2024). Neither study found supporting evidence for another of Kahan’s claims, however: that the biasing effect is greater for people with higher numerical abilities.

<sup>28</sup> (Coppock, 2023). The changes Coppock found were slight, though, as Coppock emphasizes, a purely epistemic (e.g., Bayesian) approach would predict such slight changes, given sufficiently strong prior beliefs.

<sup>29</sup> See (Levendusky, 2023) for a related discussion of Coppock.

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., (Lepoutre, 2020) and (Levy, 2022). Even then, however, a parallel argument to what I offer below can emerge, since the less obvious sorts of epistemic rationality involved (e.g., second-order rationality) may be distinct from the basis of a subject’s epistemic esteem (e.g., first-order rationality).

<sup>31</sup> For example, if moral and political truths are metaethically ‘constructed’ based on group commitments, then the group-related reasons I’ve mentioned might end of being constitutive of the truths in question, and so in fact count as genuinely epistemic reasons. See, e.g. (Dyke, 2020).

<sup>32</sup> On cautionary generics, see (Leslie, 2008, p. 15).



I now turn to the second relevant feature of certain beliefs: their being connected to epistemic esteem.

## **2. Epistemic esteem connection for political beliefs**

As I use the phrase, a belief is connected to a subject's epistemic esteem insofar as they or others in their social circles take their maintenance of that belief to (positively) demonstrate that subject's competence in identifying and weighing epistemic reasons. This connection comes in degrees, as can be brought out with certain insults – broadly speaking, the more an epistemic insult stings, the more strongly the relevant belief is tied to epistemic esteem. My own epistemic esteem is closely tied to a cluster of beliefs I have about Kant interpretation, since both I and many people who know me think those beliefs demonstrate a whole-hearted epistemic effort on my part. Nothing similar is true about my beliefs concerning baking. Hence, “you don't know what you're talking about” would sting me more if it appeared in a conversation about Kant than in a conversation about baking.

How common is it for beliefs to be connected to our epistemic esteem? Some informal sociology suggests this is quite common, since that connection would explain why someone publicly declaring that our beliefs are absurd often feels like both a personal and social threat, and why we're often tempted to respond in ways that showcase our intelligence (“no, actually you're the one who's confused here...”). In addition, both philosophical and psychological research programs revolve around epistemic esteem, whether self-esteem or social esteem. To take two examples: (1) According to Self-Affirmation Theory in social psychology, people are generally motivated to maintain a view of themselves as generally good, including being generally epistemically good,<sup>33</sup> and (2) Miranda Fricker's work on epistemic injustice turns on issues of epistemic esteem, and raises important questions about how epistemic reputation impacts epistemic self-esteem.<sup>34</sup>

Now, when people's beliefs are challenged, they can maintain their epistemic self-esteem by doing the difficult work of carefully reexamining the epistemic credentials of their beliefs. But it is often more cognitively efficient to respond to challenges by ignoring them, or through

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<sup>33</sup> See, e.g., (Steele, 1988).

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., (Fricker, 2018).

rationalization. This may partly explain the results of confabulation studies, in which subjects concoct epistemic rationalizations for beliefs that arguably lack an adequate epistemic basis.<sup>35</sup> Our aim of maintaining epistemic esteem, therefore, can lead us away from responding properly to (first-order) epistemic reasons.

How strongly are political beliefs in particular connected to epistemic esteem? One rough measure would be how people respond to dismissals of their political views. As far as I know, no study has been conducted on this precise topic. But other studies are suggestive. For example, one recent survey found that American conservatives and liberals tend to view each other “as more unintelligent than immoral.”<sup>36</sup> This perception could be understood as revealing a connection to epistemic esteem: if I take my beliefs to be maintained for good, publicly-available epistemic reasons (and want others in my circles to also regard my beliefs as being so maintained), then I’ll be tempted to regard those who disagree with me as epistemically flawed (and to publicly proclaim that). The frequency of snide and dismissive remarks in political exchanges suggests something similar – think of how often people invoke “basic common sense” in defense of contentious political views. There are thus non-conclusive but non-trivial reasons to suspect that many political beliefs are strongly connected to our epistemic esteem, whether self-esteem or social esteem. As with personal value, insofar as this connection generates a moral hazard, we can make the general claim that political beliefs are connected to epistemic esteem, even without knowing exactly what proportion.

### 3. Two Kinds of Respect

Let’s assume that we have sufficient evidence to claim that, in general, political beliefs have commanding personal value and are at least moderately connected to epistemic esteem.<sup>37</sup> Given that, is there a respectful way to persuade someone to change those beliefs? In §4, I will

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<sup>35</sup> The best-known confabulation study is (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

<sup>36</sup> (Hartman et al., 2022).

<sup>37</sup> This formulation is imprecise, not least since there are different possible *bases* of epistemic self-esteem (e.g., a belief demonstrating my ability to *gather* reasons vs. my ability to *weigh* them) as well as types of personal value (e.g., preserving my self-esteem vs. connecting me to some social group). The political beliefs I am most concerned with are those involving little conflict within either the bases of epistemic self-esteem or the bases of personal value.

argue that any attempt at such persuasion will be at least *prima facie* disrespectful. The present section sets the ground for that argument by identifying some relevant features of respect.

### *3a. Rationality respect and agency respect*

Within the Kantian ethical tradition, there are several understandings of respect. On one understanding, which I'll call "rationality respect", respect demands that we engage with each other as fellow reasoners and beings deserving of justification, especially when it comes to political topics.<sup>38</sup> Rationality respect calls on us to sincerely offer each other reasons and call out each other's errors, but also to be open to learning from each other.<sup>39</sup> Kant claims that respect for a human being "in the logical use of his reason" prohibits us from dismissing his errors as absurdities, and requires us to "suppose that his judgment must... contain some truth and to seek this out."<sup>40</sup> Hence, it is not sufficient for rationality respect to lecture somebody about why they're wrong, however sincerely.

In addition, another notion of respect that emerges from Kant: that of respecting others' agency. Of course, what this respect amounts to hinges on how widely agency is conceived. On a narrow understanding, agency is limited to exercises of principle-based autonomy, based on ends or commitments that help constitute our conscious intentions or maxims.<sup>41</sup> On a wide understanding, by contrast, agency includes all *aim-guided activity*, including activities that involve reason only peripherally, if at all.<sup>42</sup> There is at least some intuitive appeal to the thought that we should respect agency in the wide sense. Consider a reflexive attempt to scratch a minor itch, or a sudden attempt to remember a childhood friend's name based on a mere urge. As a reflex or sudden response to an urge, such activities might not be instances of narrow agency

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<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., (Darwall, 2006), (Forst, 2017, p. 158).

<sup>39</sup> This respect can take many forms, not all of which require dispassionate exchanges. See, e.g., (Cherry, 2021).

<sup>40</sup> *Metaphysics of Morals* 6:463.

<sup>41</sup> See (Valentini, 2023, pp. 89–90), from whom I borrow the phrase "agency respect," for a relatively narrow understanding of agency along these lines (albeit one with a social dimension that complements my larger argument).

<sup>42</sup> Since aims do not require reason, they are less than ends (in Kant's technical sense). See (Korsgaard, 2018, pp. 23–24); cf. *Metaphysics of Morals* 6:211 on life. I take no stand here on whether wide agency deserves respect in creatures who lack narrow agency (though, like Korsgaard, I'm inclined to believe it does). I also set aside the question of whether narrowly epistemic activities count as a form of agency (see, e.g., (Setiya, 2013)), which would complicate the distinction between the two forms of respect I've described.

(principle-based autonomy). Nonetheless, it seems intuitively (prima facie) disrespectful to interfere with agents' attempts to achieve their aims (scratching the itch, remembering the name) through those activities. Accordingly, I will use the phrase "agency respect" below for appropriate regard we should have for other humans' agency in a wide sense, including their pursuit of aims through mental activities.<sup>43</sup> Agency respects set a prima facie prohibition on interfering with others' aim-guided activities.

The prohibition against interference set by agency respect is quite strong. On a traditional Kantian approach, agency respect can forbid interference even when someone is failing to meet some obligation towards themselves. For example, by Kant's lights, spending weekends watching kitten videos would be violating my obligation to perfect myself – but unless this negatively impacts someone else, agency respect still prohibits you from disrupting my video watching.<sup>44</sup> So the mere fact that someone's activity is morally impermissible does not itself undercut the prohibition. Similarly, the mere fact that somebody is self-deceived about their own activities (and so, perhaps, violating an obligation to be truthful to themselves<sup>45</sup>) does not undercut the prohibition.<sup>46</sup> Maybe I deceive myself in thinking that I watch the kitten videos for their aesthetic merit, not admitting that my real aim is to avoid housework – even so, it would be disrespectful for you to interrupt me without good reason.

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<sup>43</sup> See, e.g., (Raz, 1986, pp. 413–420) on respect and interference, and see (Flowerree, 2017) on mental agency. My discussion here is especially indebted to Tsai's argument that rational persuasion can be disrespectful of others' autonomy (see esp. (Tsai, 2014, p. 88)). While I focus on moral agency, some recent literature on epistemic autonomy is in a similar spirit (see (Matheson & Loughed, 2021)). Though he avoids reliance on notions of rationality, autonomy, and agency Phillip Pettit's conversive theory of respect can be understood as building agency respect out of rationality respect (see esp. (Pettit, 2021, p. 47)). By contrast, Neil Levy subsumes something like agency respect under rationality respect, writing that "giving people arguments and (first-order) evidence is maximally respectful of agency" (Levy, 2022, p. 147).

<sup>44</sup> Kant also holds that there is a duty of love to *promote* others' permissible ends (e.g., MM 6:450, see also MM 6:387-88 and *Groundwork* 4:430), which is encompassed by some broad contemporary notions of respect (e.g., (Dillon, 1992)). Such a broader notion would support a stronger conclusion than the one I argue for here.

<sup>45</sup> See MM 6:430. On one reading, W. K. Clifford claimed that it was immoral to form any belief on insufficient evidence (Clifford, 1999), a claim Kant would have rejected – see (Chignell, 2007). Remember, though, that *maintaining* beliefs include more than forming them.

<sup>46</sup> Recall that, on Kant's views, we are often mistaken about our real motives in acting (see *Groundwork* 4:407). Even so, Kant claims, "[i]n order to... lead the human being to [virtue], nature has wisely implanted in [the human] the tendency to allow himself willingly to be deceived... It is only the illusion of good *in* ourselves that must be wiped out without exception, and the veil by which self-love conceals our moral defects must be torn away" (*Anthropology* 7:152-3). In a related vein, Michael Blake, extrapolating from Rawls, suggests that "a commitment to respecting persons is a commitment to respecting even their mistaken answers to foundational questions" (Blake, 2014, p. 77).

Of course, the prohibition against interference can be undercut in cases where the actions wrong others, or aim at such wrongs. It can also be undercut by fully-informed, rational consent. In fact, some readers (anticipating my argument below) may suspect that these defeaters will be present in *any* case of political persuasion. After all, all political beliefs relate to potential wrongs, and most conversation involves the persuadee consenting to a conversation (or at least to sharing their attention).

Yet while consent and possible harms can defeat prima facie agency disrespect, this defeat is not trivial. Consider a case of agency infringement not involving persuasion: your cousin, an aggressive driver, climate skeptic, and white supremacist, plans to drive his high-emissions truck to a white supremacist convention 200 miles away. Aware of your liberal scruples, he invites you to try and stop him. The only non-violent way you have to keep him from achieving his aims is to hide his keys for the weekend.

In this case, both potentially defeating factors are present. Your cousin gives what sounds like open-ended *consent* for you to try and interfere with his plans, and his trip would have a variety of potential *harms* or *wrongs* (collisions with other drivers, emissions from his truck, and contributions to a racist movement). Yet, for all that, it is not clear that the defeaters are enough to justify you in hiding his keys.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, even if the overriding defeaters are sufficient to justify your action, the reasons against interfering in his agency have not been undercut entirely – if you hide the keys, you might owe your cousin an apology, and you can expect significant (and not entirely unreasonable) blowback from him. The lesson is that consent does not trivially undercut prima facie agency disrespect, and the mere potential for harm and contributions to collective wrongs does not trivially override it.

Below, I assume that the political beliefs generally (though not always) have no more potential for harm or contributions to wrongs than the cousin's planned convention trip.<sup>48</sup> Political beliefs and the activities of maintaining them typically have less of a direct connection to wrongs than driving to a racist convention – their most direct connection to harms often go via their impact on votes, and it's relatively uncontroversial that there is strong presumption against

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<sup>47</sup> In "On a supposed right to lie from philanthropy," Kant offers a notoriously conservative view on this front, denying that even likely murder could justify disrespect (in the form of a lie). But even on more moderate views, potential harm does not always rebut the force of respect.

<sup>48</sup> Unless we accept a very strong understanding of doxastic wrongdoing – stronger than that defended in, e.g., (Basu & Schroeder, 2019). See (Begby, 2018) for a relevant skeptical discussion.

interference in voting. Moreover, the aims many psychologists posit that drive the maintenance of political beliefs are typically morally unobjectionable: there is nothing intrinsically problematic about (e.g.) aiming to maintain social connections or to efficiently manage one's cognitive economy. Moreover, such aims are typically as central to a person's agency as the aims behind your cousin's actions, and so provide at least as strong a basis for agency respect.

For those reasons, I assume that the consent involved in political conversation often has no more licensing force than your cousin's open-ended invitation to try and stop him. Consent may always have *some* force, but it does not trivially undercut considerations of disrespect. To appreciate what exactly this amounts to in political exchanges, however, it will help to have labels for specific failures of conversational respect.

### *3b. Three Failures of Respect*

In §4, I appeal to three types of failures of rationality respect and agency respect. The first is a failure of agency respect: insensitivity. The second, depending on the details, is a failure of either rationality respect or agency respect: incivility (a label inspired by (Rini, 2020)). The third is primarily a failure of rationality respect, though potentially of agency respect as well: manipulation. This argumentative structure constitutes a dialectical buffer: readers not sold on the relevant notions of respect might find the conclusions in terms of insensitivity, incivility, or manipulation more compelling, or vice-versa.

These three particular failures of respect correspond to three options a persuader has regarding a persuadee's political beliefs: ignoring those beliefs' commanding personal value, explicitly addressing that value, or implicitly addressing it. If the persuader simply *ignores* that commanding value, their action is at least *prima facie* insensitive. If the persuader instead *explicitly* addresses it, however, their action is at least *prima facie* uncivil, since it conspicuously threatens the persuadee's epistemic esteem. The final option is for the persuader to *implicitly* address the commanding personal value, by deliberately crafting their persuasive communication so that it doesn't obviously threaten the subject's agency or their epistemic esteem. But while

this approach to persuasion can be effective (and even compassionate), it involves deliberate psychological puppeteering, constituting at least *prima facie* objectionable manipulation.<sup>49</sup>

On each horn, there can be undercutting or rebutting defeaters for the *prima facie* disrespect. But the defeat is never trivial, so the details of each persuasion attempt will matter.

#### **4. The Trilemma: Insensitivity, Incivility, or Manipulation**

I now consider each horn of the trilemma in detail, beginning with the case where a persuader simply ignores the commanding personal value of the persuadee's belief. Note that while commanding personal value is crucial for all three horns, the connection to epistemic esteem is most important for the second, where that esteem is directly threatened. Hence, given a belief with commanding personal value but without any strong connection to the persuadee's epistemic esteem – say, certain private religious convictions – the trilemma could be avoided.

##### *4a. Insensitivity*

Trying to persuade somebody can be one way of *expressing* rationality respect and of *bolstering* their epistemic esteem. Offering you reasons with the aim of changing your mind, as opposed to trying to manipulate or browbeat you, expresses a level of trust in your ability to respond to reasons.<sup>50</sup>

However, when a belief has commanding personal value, trying to persuade someone to change that belief without any regard for the relevant personal value amounts to attempted interference with an expression of the persuadee's agency, namely, their maintenance of the belief for the sake of personal aims. As such, the attempted interference is at least a *prima facie* failure of agency respect.<sup>51</sup> Such failures of respect are naturally described as moral *insensitivity*.

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<sup>49</sup> For discussion of the puppeteering metaphor, see (Coons & Weber, 2014, p. 15). Below, I return to the question of whether persuasion might involve unobjectionable manipulation.

<sup>50</sup> There are other ways of expressing rationality respect besides persuasion, however, such as reasoning together (see, e.g., (Rini, 2018, p. 4)). Ferkany argues that, in some contexts, anything other than persuasive argumentation is disrespectful, though he also appeals to the self-respect of the persuader and their respect for justice (Ferkany, 2021). See also (Breakey, 2023, pp. 11–13).

<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Barrett Emerick claims that, “since some beliefs help to identify us, challenging another's important, identity-defining beliefs can be a threat to the other herself” (Emerick, 2016, p.6). Note that, for this to be a

Consider again Kahan’s case, where someone’s political belief connects them to a community they vitally depend on. Even if the beliefs in question are epistemically irrational, the agent’s underlying aim (e.g., maintaining their well-being) is morally permissible, and the maintenance of the beliefs does not directly harm or wrong others. Hence, agency respect calls on us to refrain from interfering, and persuaders should show some sensitivity (i.e., paying some attention to those aims in a way that shapes the interaction<sup>52</sup>), unless sufficient defeaters are in play.

To be sure, some of a persuadee’s personal aims could be achieved with different beliefs. Someone’s need for community, e.g., could in principle be satisfied just as well by a conspiracy-debunking community as by a conspiracy-accepting community. However, the fact that aims can be satisfied in other ways is not a strong defeater for prima facie insensitivity or disrespect. If I’m planning to add some cardamom to my soup, it would be insensitive for you to preemptively throw out the cardamom, even when my end of making a tasty soup could be satisfied without it. In addition, for most beliefs with personal value, there would be significant *transition costs* in achieving the same aims with new beliefs. Shifting one’s community or bases of self-esteem, for example, requires cognitive labor, and a sensitive, agency-respecting interlocutor would show awareness of that fact.

What mitigating factors *would* defeat the prima facie insensitivity of ignoring the personal value attaching to a persuadee’s political beliefs? Sufficiently informed and rational consent could be an undercutting defeater. If someone chooses to sit behind a public “The Moon Landing was a Deep State Hoax - Change my Mind!” booth, their public consent could undercut the charge of insensitivity of trying to persuade them otherwise, not least because arguing with them provides them an opportunity to publicly signal their group allegiances.<sup>53</sup> As the cousin case suggests, though, even explicit, open-ended consent has its moral limits. Imagine a skilled persuader coming along and systematically dismantling the booth-sitter’s worldview, ignoring the signs that this is psychologically devastating. Despite the persuadee’s explicit consent, the persuader could still be guilty of insensitivity. Part of what makes meaningful consent difficult in

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*culpable* failure of respect, the persuader should be able to know that the beliefs have personal value for the persuadee. But that condition is plausibly met for in most political exchanges.

<sup>52</sup> This is roughly the analysis of sensitivity defended in (May, 1992). May argues that insensitivity is not always culpable, which suggests that prima facie insensitivity is *not* mitigated by a lack of responsibility for failing to recognize personal value. See also (Pedersen, 2021), who argues that indifference to others’ wellbeing is a form of disrespect.

<sup>53</sup> On the value of signaling, see (Levy, 2021).



these cases is the combination of commanding personal value and the connection to epistemic esteem, especially epistemic self-esteem: someone who consents to persuasion may not have realized that they were at risk of losing something with personal value. In such cases, the persuadee is not fully aware of (informed about) what they are consenting to.

Two other defeaters would be if the persuadee's personal aims were morally impermissible or if their way of pursuing them directly wronged others. Say that having power over others was someone's ultimate aim, and that racist political beliefs helped them achieve it. It is implausible that such an aim is itself deserving of respect (making this an undercutting defeater), but even if it were, a persuader might escape the charge of insensitivity if the persuadee achieved that aim through beliefs that (somehow) directly led to harms. Perhaps the clearest case of defeat would be where the persuader's disregard for the racist's aims arose from the persuader's sensitivity to agency of people who were directly harmed by the racist's beliefs. But even in such cases, it is tempting to think that the defeater was merely rebutting, so that, in many situations, an agent should still have *some* sensitivity to the personal impact of their persuasion on the persuadee.

Finally, the prima facie insensitivity might be defeated if the persuader did not *owe* the persuadee respect – say, because the persuader was in personal danger, or because the persuadee had previously treated the persuader with contempt.<sup>54</sup> This situation is common for some politically marginalized groups. For other agents, though, the prima facie insensitivity in persuasion without regard for personal value is not easily defeated.

The alternative to ignoring commanding personal value is to take it into account somehow. This brings us to the other horns of the trilemma.

#### *4b. Incivility*

Respect is sometimes connected to ideals of transparency or publicity. Hence, we might think that explicitly acknowledging the commanding personal value of the persuadee's belief is sufficient for respect. But while reflective subjects should probably recognize that their political beliefs *have* some sort of personal value, calling out the *commanding* personal value of their

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<sup>54</sup> See (Fricker, 2007, p. 123)

beliefs amounts to an attack on their epistemic esteem. Even when that esteem is ill-founded, directly attacking it interferes with someone's pursuit of a permissible aim. Following Regina Rini's adaption of Erving Goffman's notion of "civil inattention," I will call this form of prima facie disrespect "incivility" (something related to Diana Baumrind's notion of "inflicted insight").<sup>55</sup>

To see the force of this charge, consider other cases of ill-founded self-esteem: someone who takes their outdated outfit to demonstrate their aesthetic competence, or someone who takes their ineffective herbal supplement routine to demonstrate their competence at self-care. Provided that no significant harm would result from the outfit or herbal supplement, it would be needlessly rude or uncivil to point out that their outfit choice really just came from (say) their cheapness, or that their choice of supplement just came from some the influence of some deceptive marketing. After all, few of us would really want to be disillusioned in similar ways ("you don't look as good as you feel") unless something more were at stake. Significantly, despite championing honesty in other contexts, Kant holds a similar view of moral illusion. In the section of the *Anthropology*, "On permissible moral illusion," he writes that "[i]n order to save virtue, or at least lead the human being to it nature has wisely implanted in him the tendency to allow himself willingly to be deceived," suggesting that we should allow this illusion in others (though not in ourselves).<sup>56</sup> So even ill-founded self-esteem calls for some level of respect. The reasons against undermining social esteem are intuitively stronger: if somebody is esteemed in their social circles for their fashion sense, it would be uncivil (and cruel) for a fashion journalist to undermine that social esteem.

Consider uncivil calling-out from the persuadee's point of view. A persuader says, "look, I know you think climate change is a big deal, but the main reason you hold onto that belief is to stay connected to your intellectual community." Unless the belief is not connected to epistemic esteem at all, it is hard to imagine not feeling disrespected by this, or (if done in public) not feeling as though one's social standing were being attacked. The persuader who says this expresses a dim view of the persuadee's epistemic rationality, which is sometimes taken as a

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<sup>55</sup> (Rini, 2020), (Baumrind, 1979). What I say here is consistent with some forms of incivility being fully justified. See, e.g., (Harvey, 1999; Zamalin, 2021).

<sup>56</sup> *Anthropology* 7:151-3.

hallmark of rationality disrespect.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, insofar as preserving epistemic esteem is itself an aim or a way of pursuing an aim, the incivility also constitutes *prima facie* agency disrespect.

Reciprocity might seem like a potential defeater. Part of the reason that such statements seem uncivil is that they are condescending, spoken as though the persuader were not influenced by similar personal factors – even though it may be obvious to the persuadee that they are. So even if what the persuader says is true, they might not have the right *standing* to say it.<sup>58</sup> Hence, if the persuader acknowledges that they are in a similar position to the persuadee in *presently* (not just previously) maintaining their corresponding political beliefs largely for personal reasons, this might defuse the sense of incivility. However, a dilemma surfaces here. If the persuader is sincere in their acknowledgment, then they are admitting that they maintain their own belief mainly for non-epistemic reasons, which might preclude them from persuading in good faith. On the other hand, if the persuader is insincere, then they are being deceptive, which itself constitutes *prima facie* rationality disrespect.

There is a further layer here. Say that sufficient defeaters are in play, and that the persuadee merely *feels* disrespected.<sup>59</sup> Even then, affronts to our esteem (epistemic or otherwise) can be profoundly psychologically disruptive.<sup>60</sup> That disruption can therefore itself be a *prima facie* failure of agency respect, since profound psychological disruptions make it harder to pursue our own projects. Even when that disruption is ultimately justified, the result may be a duty of repair on the persuader’s part.

Perhaps the best defeater for this *prima facie* incivility is the context of a loving or trusting relationship.<sup>61</sup> Some friends can call each other out on certain mistakes and illusions without incivility. In effect, this involves consent together with long-term reciprocity: if we’ve helped each other navigate epistemic mistakes in the past, then I might be able to listen non-

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<sup>57</sup> See (Tsai, 2014, p. 88). A similar point holds for insults. For a general account of insult in terms of expressions of a lack of due regard (and thereby forms of disrespect), even when no offense is intended, see (Daly, 2018).

<sup>58</sup> For a discussion of how this plays out with moral beliefs in particular, see (Rini, 2020). (Dover, 2019b) defends hypocritical moral engagement and casts doubt on appeals to standing, but on grounds that do not straightforwardly apply to the cases I am concerned with.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. “You do not actually insult a narcissist by treating them with ordinary, appropriate regard, however offended they are by that behavior” (Daly 2018, 521).

<sup>60</sup> Hugh Breakey offers a helpful summary of the disruptive psychological potential of persuasive argument, but claims that there “may be nothing intrinsically wrong” with those disruptions (Breakey, 2023, p. 6).

<sup>61</sup> See (Tsai, 2014, pp. 107–109), (Emerick, 2016), and (Pettit, 2021). For a subtle discussion of how this can develop in conditions of interpersonal alienation, see (Dover, 2019a).

defensively when you tell me how personal values are impacting my beliefs. This may be because the ongoing relationship supports my overall epistemic self-esteem, in that I can pride myself on recognizing you as a good person to listen to, and because our friendship contributes to my epistemic social esteem. These relationships are difficult to cultivate, however. Hence, making it merely appear that there is such a relationship is often a tempting manipulative strategy. This brings us to the final horn of the trilemma.

#### *4c. Manipulation*

The final option for a persuader is to neither ignore nor explicitly address the commanding personal value of the persuadee's beliefs, but instead to address it implicitly, factoring it into either the content or framing of the persuasive communication in order to persuade.<sup>62</sup> Such an approach can show real sensitivity to the persuadee's ends, and can avoid incivility. For those reasons, it is often the most effective and the most compassionate approach to persuasion, and can sometimes avoid any flagrant failure of agency respect. However, this approach hinges on discreet maneuvering around the persuadee's psychology: *concealing* the fact that it is shaped by the commanding value of the persuadee's beliefs in order to avoid perceived incivility. Because of that discreet maneuvering, this approach amounts to *prima facie* manipulation, and so a *prima facie* failure of rationality respect. As in the other cases, there can be defeating factors, but, as before, those factors are not always within reach.

To start, set aside persuasive techniques which only superficially address personal value. Hedges such as "this is just my opinion, but..." may suggest that the persuader is not challenging the persuadee's beliefs, and perhaps acknowledging those beliefs' personal value. Using such hedges need not itself be manipulative, but this is often because they are hollow or insincere – throw-away lines that are not shaped by a full appreciation of the relevant personal values. When the persuadee's beliefs have low levels of personal value, that might be unproblematic. But when

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<sup>62</sup> In principle, a persuader could (out of rationality respect) try to implicitly address the personal value in a way that did not increase the persuasive appeal of their message. In practice, however, this is often impossible: how could you implicitly ease my worries about losing my social connections without knowingly increasing the persuasive appeal of your message?

the personal value commands the maintenance of the beliefs, the worry becomes one of *prima facie* insensitivity instead of manipulation.<sup>63</sup>

We can also set aside persuasive techniques that implicitly but *unintentionally* address personal values. Say that you make a sincere and complex persuasive argument to me over many days, and in so doing, you inadvertently give me a new social connection (you) and bolster my epistemic esteem (by publicly treating me as someone who can handle a complex argument). Those factors might well increase my openness to persuasion. Insofar as they were unintentional, though, you are free from any charge of objectionable manipulation. But, of course, a persuader cannot plan to inadvertently address personal value. The worry of objectionable manipulation arises once the appeal to personal value becomes intentional.

To illustrate the worry about manipulation in detail, consider a persuasive approach that is based on recognition of political beliefs' connection to epistemic self-esteem and commanding personal value. In a series of studies, David Broockman and Joshua Kalla have demonstrated the persuasive power of two non-confrontational techniques involving narratives. Broockman and Kalla's techniques may be the most effective ones in the recent empirical literature, producing small but durable reductions in targeted voters' negative attitudes towards trans people and undocumented immigrants. Canvassers who use the first technique, "analogic perspective taking," ask voters to think of a certain personal experience (e.g., a time when they were judged negatively for being different), and then to consider how that experience relates to the experiences of some vulnerable group (e.g., transgender people facing exclusion laws).<sup>64</sup> The second technique, "perspective-getting", is simpler: the canvasser simply shares a narrative from a member of the vulnerable group, and encourages the persuadee to reflect on its implications. In both cases, the canvassers deliberately avoid overt confrontation and listen non-judgmentally to the persuadees, "mak[ing] it clear we're not there to judge them"<sup>65</sup> and "refraining from

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<sup>63</sup> Something similar might apply to certain *nudges* concerning belief, which avoid overt attacks on subjects' epistemic esteem, but might not take account of the personal value of the relevant beliefs. Defenders of 'libertarian paternalism', in effect, attempt to take account of both – see, e.g., (Sunstein, 2015). But the most attractive instances of libertarian paternalism, such as default insurance policies, do not challenge beliefs in any significant way, and instead try to shape behaviors that have minimal connections to our epistemic esteem and little personal value.

<sup>64</sup> (Broockman & Kalla, 2016). The label "analogic perspective-taking" was introduced later, in (Kalla & Broockman, 2023).

<sup>65</sup> (Kalla & Broockman, 2020, p. 414)

expressing any negative judgments” about their point of view.<sup>66</sup> The canvasser’s assigned goal, however is “for this non-judgmental exchange of narratives to end with individuals self-generating and explicitly stating aloud implications of the narratives that [run] contrary to any exclusionary attitudes individuals previously stated.”<sup>67</sup> These conversations typically last only 10 minutes, but are able to shift voters’ opinions by several percentage points for several months – a large enough shift to tip elections.<sup>68</sup>

Broockman and Kalla are explicit about why they use non-confrontational narratives. Previous research in psychology, they write, has shown that “individuals resist persuasion on many topics, including those related to outgroups, due to self-image concerns,” that “individuals do not want to admit that their current views are in error,” and that “yielding to persuasion may also threaten their sense of autonomy by making them feel vulnerable to manipulation.”<sup>69</sup> On the other hand, they write, previous research also suggests that

individuals perceive narratives as less manipulative [than arguments] and that narratives produce less counter-arguing than direct argumentation... individuals also often become “immersed” and “transported” into narratives, putting individuals into a less critical state of mind... than when individuals think about arguments, while also increasing engagement with their content.<sup>70</sup>

In addition, Broockman and Kalla note that canvassers’ “refraining from expressing any negative judgments” about what the voters say “may affirm individuals’ self-esteem and decrease the perceived threat to the self from also acknowledging the persuader’s viewpoint in reciprocation”.<sup>71</sup> The commanding personal value of the persuadee’s belief is thus front and

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<sup>66</sup> (Kalla & Broockman, 2020, p. 412)

<sup>67</sup> (Kalla & Broockman, 2023, p. 7)

<sup>68</sup> Broockman and Kalla’s work, in a sense, offers a well-honed application of two familiar ideas: that confrontation is counter-productive, and that narratives are more powerful than arguments. Both are recurring themes in, e.g., (Carnegie, 2007). For a recent student on the comparative (and complementary) power of arguments and narratives, see (Schwitzgebel et al., 2022).

<sup>69</sup> (Kalla & Broockman, 2020, p. 410)

<sup>70</sup> (Kalla & Broockman, 2020, p. 412).

<sup>71</sup> (Kalla & Broockman, 2020, p. 412)

center throughout, as canvassers produce a “less critical state of mind” with a focus on how the beliefs connect to the persuadee’s self-image, sense of autonomy, and self-esteem.

For those reasons, these techniques go beyond simply telling stories to persuade. There is nothing inherently manipulative about using narratives to make a point, especially insofar as narratives (like images) can help us appreciate the true weight of reasons.<sup>72</sup> Yet when narratives are used to bolster self-esteem and bypass critical reactions (as happens with some politically inflammatory journalism), their use becomes morally questionable.

To be sure, given the violence that trans people and undocumented immigrants face, it is plausible that consequentialist considerations justify such techniques in these contexts, rebutting any prima facie disrespect. Moreover, by combatting certain biases, these techniques arguably improve the persuadee’s rationality in certain respects<sup>73</sup> and increase the voters’ compassion or respect for members of vulnerable groups. However, for the reasons noted above, and in light of common narratives about liberal elitism, it is worth considering whether the techniques involve disrespectful manipulation.

Manipulation is sometimes understood as a lack of transparency in action. On its face, Broockman and Kalla’s techniques appear to involve transparency: canvassers make it clear that they are affiliated with a certain interest group, and sometimes share their own personal experiences during the conversation.<sup>74</sup> However, there are two reasons to think that prima facie objectionable manipulation is involved. First, the approach is at least misleading, if not outright deceptive. For canvassers must *appear* non-judgmental, and listen attentively, which encourages their persuadees to regard them as open-minded about the topic. Yet the canvassers are not open-minded – otherwise, they could not (in good faith) operate with the goal of reducing the persuadee’s exclusionary attitudes. Second, the canvassers are trained to approach their targets in light of facts about the psychological power of narratives, and they do not disclose that training. They therefore treat the persuadees more as psychological subjects than as fellow reasoners. As one popular discussion notes, the conversations involved in analogic perspective taking are

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<sup>72</sup> See (Lepoutre, 2022) and (Rini, 2018).

<sup>73</sup> This consideration is used to justify forms of epistemic paternalism (e.g., (McKenna, 2020)).

<sup>74</sup> In the original study, some of the canvassers were transgender or gender-nonconforming, though, surprisingly, non-transgender and gender-conforming canvassers were comparably effective.

“closer to what a psychotherapist might have with a patient than a typical political argument”<sup>75</sup> – except that therapists’ clients typically give informed consent to the therapist’s techniques.<sup>76</sup>

I suggest that it is sufficient for persuasion to be at least *prima facie* objectionably manipulative (as a failure of rationality respect) if it has both features, that is, if the action (a) involves misleadingness or deception, (b) is shaped by the persuader seeing the persuadee as a psychological subject instead of a fellow reasoner who is capable of making their own judgments.<sup>77</sup> In such actions, the persuader acts like a covert puppeteer. A puppeteer uses misleadingness or deception to conceal their techniques, and takes their puppet as an object to be directed, as opposed to a fellow reasoner. Typically, this means that they could just as easily make their puppet nod in response to an absurd or harmful proposition as in response to a well-supported, beneficial one. Broockman and Kalla’s techniques have both features, and so are at least *prima facie* objectionably manipulative.<sup>78</sup> As a result, using their techniques to persuade leaves a moral remainder, of a kind that could lead to not-entirely-unreasonable blowback. Imagine the headline on a conservative news website: “Watch out! Door-to-door liberal psychologists use stories to pull your strings.”

Setting aside those particular persuasive techniques, are there other ways a persuader’s communicative attempt could implicitly address the commanding personal value of a persuadee’s beliefs while lacking the features (a) and (b)? It is hard to see how – using the

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<sup>75</sup> <https://www.vox.com/2020/1/29/21065620/broockman-kalla-deep-canvassing>. In the terms of (Rini, 2018), this means they do not fulfill their (imperfect) duty to be open to persuasion.

<sup>76</sup> Another notable feature of the technique is its lack of sensitivity to the truth of the desired belief, or to whether a change of belief would benefit the persuadee. As Kalla and Broockman themselves note (Kalla & Broockman, 2020, p. 423), it seems like the same technique could be used for conservative causes as well, perhaps weaponizing problematic bathroom narratives. See also <https://www.vox.com/2020/1/29/21065620/broockman-kalla-deep-canvassing>.

<sup>77</sup> See (Rini, 2020, p. 5). Moti Gorin argues plausibly that feature (b) can be sufficient for manipulation, so I do not take (a) to be necessary for manipulation (Gorin, 2014). I include it, however, since deception is present in many paradigmatic cases of *morally problematic* manipulation – see (Fantl, 2018, p. 158).

<sup>78</sup> Consider another example of an effective technique from recent literature: arguing for some politically-charged position, and then stating that there are comparably good arguments for the other side – a statement that purports to express some level of respect (Xu & Petty, 2022). If the “other side” statement is insincere, then this technique (which taps into norms of reciprocity) would also seem to be *prima facie* manipulative. But if the statement is sincere, then this would no longer seem to be persuasion – since one cannot rationally aim to significantly change another’s belief on the basis of some argument while believing that there are comparably good opposing arguments. For a related but more obviously manipulative persuasive technique, see (Voss & Raz, 2016) on “tactical empathy.”



commanding personal value of someone's belief *in order* to change a specific belief is treating that value like a puppet string, a string that needs to be hidden to avoid prima facie incivility.<sup>79</sup>

There are, however, possible defeaters for the prima facie disrespect. Agreeing to speak to a canvasser would seem to involve some level of consent, which is sometimes a defeater for otherwise objectionable manipulation. When we walk into a realtor's open house, for example, we implicitly consent to some forms of manipulation, such as the use of pleasant scents.<sup>80</sup> Yet securing *meaningful* consent is difficult with highly effective techniques like Broockman and Kalla's. For such techniques hinge on the persuadee not feeling that they are being judged or manipulated, and fully informing them would reveal that the canvasser is equipped with a psychological technique that is designed to lower their defenses.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, if everything were made explicit, the communication would become prima facie uncivil.

Other defeaters might be found by reflecting on nonconsensual but morally unobjectionable forms of manipulation. As Sarah Buss points out, some familiar forms of romantic engagement begin with mild deceit and manipulation, such as "feigned indifference, walks in the moonlight, carefully chosen music, carefully chosen poetry".<sup>82</sup> Even when we do not explicitly consent to these, Buss argues, they can be morally unproblematic, provided that the agents involved treat each other with reciprocity, as equals.<sup>83</sup> A seducer's manipulation becomes problematic, Buss claims, when he treats his romantic interest as "a character in his plot, rather than as someone with whom he shares the world."<sup>84</sup> Yet this element of equality or reciprocity is conspicuously missing in techniques like Broockman and Kalla's, and would not be an easy

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<sup>79</sup> To be clear: the problem is not with recognizing commanding personal value, and letting that shape communication. A teacher who establishes a good classroom atmosphere may do so out of this recognition. No failure of respect need be involved, so long as the teacher is not using that to generate specific beliefs in the students. Thanks to Olivia Bailey for this example.

<sup>80</sup> (Baron, 2014, p. 119).

<sup>81</sup> For one study showing how narratives become less effective when persuadees identify the persuasive intent, see (Wang & Shen, 2019).

<sup>82</sup> (Buss, 2005, p. 220)

<sup>83</sup> (Buss, 2005, p. 219). A related approach would be to appeal to a reasonable expectation that the target of persuasion's most reliable (and possibly hypothetical or post hoc) judgment about their own good would endorse the manipulative intervention (Talbot, 2013, p. 287). Especially for beliefs that connect people to their social groups, however, it's rarely obvious that manipulatively changing these beliefs would be compatible with the target's own good, as they would judge it.

<sup>84</sup> (Buss, 2005, p. 229)

addition.<sup>85</sup> That said, *if* two people were given comparable training on narrative-based persuasion *and* gave informed, rational consent to no-holds-barred mutual persuasion, then the prima facie disrespectfulness of the technique could be completely undercut. In most political encounters, however, this is not an option.

My main argument is now complete: for any belief involving commanding personal value and strong connections to epistemic esteem, any attempt at persuasion will be prima facie insensitive, uncivil, or objectionably manipulative, and thereby be a prima facie failure of either rationality respect or agency respect. To be sure, the objectionableness of those forms of disrespect is sometimes rebutted or undercut. That happens in some cases of protecting vulnerable groups, as well as in cases where the persuader is in a vulnerable position, or (due to some past wrong or standing injustice) does not owe the persuadee respect.<sup>86</sup> Even when rebutted, however, that prima facie disrespect leaves a moral remainder that can potentially generate reactive attitudes and blowback – aftereffects a persuader should be prepared for.

## 5. Potential Responses

Even given the general assumptions outlined in §2, some political beliefs may lack either commanding personal value or any strong connection to subjects' epistemic esteem. In such cases, at least some of the above moral hazards will not arise. However, I suspect that type of case is uncommon, and that our default assumption should be that the moral hazards are present. That raises the question: if the argument in §4 is correct, then what is the best course of action when political persuasion would be desirable but the hazards are present? In this section, I briefly consider five options: plowing ahead, non-engagement, aiming lower, reciprocal positioning, and collective motive realignment.

**Plowing ahead:** Even when the moral hazards are present, there are times when persuasion is nonetheless obligatory. In those cases, a persuader must pick their moral poison: insensitivity, incivility, or manipulation. What my argument rules out in most cases is

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<sup>85</sup> Another, more obviously problematic approach, might be to decrease the persuadee's epistemic self-esteem through gaslighting.

<sup>86</sup> For one helpful discussion, see (Bierria, 2014).

unflinching self-righteousness: the political persuader who thinks that, because they were sincerely giving good arguments or evidence, they have nothing to apologize for.

**Non-engagement:** The opposite response to the above argument is to abandon political persuasion altogether. In some cases, I suspect that this is indeed the morally-best course of action. Successful political persuasion is psychologically demanding, and there are often better things we can do with our energy. Unfortunately, *avoiding* rational engagement is not automatically respectful. Matthew Ferkany argues that respect supports a prima facie duty to argue with others, providing what José Medina calls “epistemic friction.”<sup>87</sup> It can be disrespectful to coddle others by not engaging with them, especially when others attempt to engage us in persuasive dialogue.<sup>88</sup> As with other issues concerning respect, reciprocity can help mitigate such prima facie disrespect. “Neither of us is going to budge – let’s shelve it” is more respectful than “you’re not going to budge – let’s shelve it.”

**Aiming lower:** The moral hazards arise from aiming to significantly change beliefs that have commanding personal value and strong connections to epistemic esteem. Yet there need be nothing disrespectful about aiming to change *adjacent* beliefs that involve low degrees of personal value or only weak connections to epistemic esteem, or about aiming to slightly decrease someone’s confidence in their beliefs.<sup>89</sup> For example, instead of trying to persuade a climate skeptic that the climate crisis is real, a persuader could aim to persuade them merely that there are *some* reasons in favor of believing in the climate crisis.<sup>90</sup> This approach is rarely easy, though, since, in the heat of conversation about political issues, it is difficult to distinguish between a more and less modest points of disagreement.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, deliberately avoiding the main point of disagreement can itself be a form of disrespectful coddling or manipulation.

**Reciprocal positioning:** Another option is to respectfully engage without *aiming* at any changes of belief. This is the approach that, by his own account, the blues musician Daryl Davis took with Klan leader Roger Kelly. Davis approached Kelly initially merely out of desire to

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<sup>87</sup>(Ferkany, 2021), drawing on (Medina, 2012).

<sup>88</sup> See (Rini, 2018, pp. 3–4).

<sup>89</sup> Thanks to Maxime Lepoutre for suggesting this approach. As noted above, (Coppock, 2023) gives reason to think that slight changes in political belief is a realistic aim, at least in controlled settings.

<sup>90</sup> In fairness, Gutmann and Thompson (quoted in the introduction) can be read as suggesting this, as opposed to demanding full persuasion.

<sup>91</sup> On the complex impact of irritation or anger on how people process persuasive messages, see (Petty & Briñol, 2015).

understand the latter's racist views. This developed into a years-long conversation that culminated in Kelly leaving the Klan. This, in some respects, is the same approach as motivational interviewing, a collaborative communication style widely used in clinical psychology and social work. Someone using motivational interviewing presents a client with open-ended questions, in a spirit of curiosity. The interviewer might hope that the conversation will empower the client to change a problematic behavior, but does not aim at any particular psychological result. Both Davis and the advocates of motivational interviewing emphasize the respectful nature of their approaches.<sup>92</sup> It is precisely because this approach involves reciprocity and a lack of unilateral aim that it does not constitute manipulation, though it could lapse into manipulation if the expressed reciprocity became insincere.

While reciprocal positioning is valuable, it is energy- and time-intensive. Davis states that he did not encounter overt racism until later childhood, which made his curiosity sincere; it is much harder to imagine such curiosity emerging in people whose lives are consistently impacted by racism. Moreover, taking this approach with people occupying dangerously false perspectives comes with the risks of the persuader being drawn into that perspective, and of legitimizing those perspectives in the public's eyes.

**Collective motive realignment:** Dan Kahan suggests that society's general interest in forming accurate beliefs through the exchange of information may call for "collective interventions" that align people's non-epistemic and epistemic motives. Mikael Klintman sketches a model intervention in a non-political case: the existing academic structures incentivize psychologists publishing reputation-building, eye-catching studies instead of scrutinizing existing research.<sup>93</sup> If however, structures could be changed so as to reward such scrutiny and openness to changes of view, then psychologists' personal motives, including their desire for professional epistemic esteem, could better support changing beliefs when there is good epistemic reason to do so. Nothing about such a change would require disrespect. Of course, structural changes within academia are difficult, and broader social structural changes are even more so. If, however, it were widely recognized that such collective changes were needed, then perhaps they could be achieved.

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<sup>92</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORp3q1Oaezw> and (Miller & Rollnick, 2012, p. 16).

<sup>93</sup> (Klintman, 2019, p. 216). I have expanded Klintman's example slightly. See also (Rini, 2020, p. 21).

## Conclusion

My aim in this paper has been to show that, for any beliefs with commanding personal value and a strong connection to epistemic esteem, any persuasive attempt will be *prima facie* disrespectful. That worry is defeated in some contexts, so my argument does not imply that everyone has a “right to their opinion.” Nonetheless, the defeat is not trivial. Since there are reasons for thinking political beliefs generally have the moral hazard-generating features, my argument suggests a general presumption against political persuasion. When that presumption is defeated, there is often a moral remainder that can generate potential blowback and duties of repair. Anticipating that blowback and fulfilling those duties of repair may be crucial for long-term success of persuasion projects.

I close with a meta-note. For some readers, the belief that political persuasion is generally respectful might itself have commanding personal value and a strong connection to epistemic esteem. Does that make my attempt at persuasive argumentation here disrespectful? I hope not – the “*prima facie*” qualification in my claim is an instance of aiming lower as a persuader, and you (hopefully) knew what you were in for when you started reading.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Pushing back against this argument, moreover, provides an opportunity for achieving personal aims and solidifying epistemic esteem. Partly in that light, I hope, this paper has benefited from helpful discussions with many people, including Michael Ball-Blakely, Michael Blake, Eugene Chislenko, Dan Coren, Cody Dout, Stephen Gardiner, Jeff Greenberg, Hanna Gunn, Brittney High, Sofia Huerter, Jessica Li, Ishani Maitra, Lou Matz, Josh May, Conor Mayo-Wilson, Jamie Mayerfeld, Edward Oudanonh, Richard Petty, Mike Raven, Shawn Wang, Megan Wu, Alice Xing, Nancy Xu, and especially Olivia Bailey, Erica Bigelow, Maxime Lepoutre, Laura Papish, Terrènce Pope, Gina Rini, and the late (and dearly missed) Bill Talbott. Thanks also to my Winter 2023 and 2024 Phil484 research groups, audiences at George Washington University and the 2022 Northwest Philosophy Conference, and two extremely helpful referees for *JMP*.

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