With all due respect: Controversial beliefs and the limits of responsible argumentation

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This paper considers whether there are limits to responsible argumentation when confronting positions that are a manifestation of bigotry, are racist, misogynistic, homophobic, or highly offensive in other ways. Can responsible arguing become irresponsible in such contexts? And are there situations in which a refusal to engage is the most responsible way to deal with a particular position?

KEYWORDS: Virtue argumentation theory, deeply-held beliefs, responsible inquiry

1. INTRODUCTION

I start this paper by addressing the need for critical thinking in the context of the sorry state of public discourse and the challenges presented by a general disinclination to engage critically and responsibly. Noting the ways in which many intransigent positions are deeply-held, I move on briefly to consider deeply-held commitments and their origins. In the third section of the paper, I discuss the advantages of an agent-centred approach to argumentation over a standard approach, arguing that it offers better prospects for effective critical engagement. In the final section of the paper, I consider possible limits to this approach in certain contexts through consideration of various types of cases.

2. THE STATE OF DEBATE

It is commonly agreed that critical thinking and good argumentation provide an antidote to the current state of socio-public discourse and debate. As participants in public debate play fast and loose with the truth; present opinion as fact; pay scant regard to the evidence; and ever more polarised opinions are influenced and formed by rhetorical

appeal to emotion and prejudice, the observation (the origin of which is unknown, but commonly (mis)attributed to Winston Churchill) that, "A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth gets a chance to put its pants (boots) on." seems ever more apposite. The burgeoning role of social media in coverage and debate of current affairs and social and cultural issues exacerbates these challenges for achieving truthful exchange. Reporting and debate via social media platforms means there are so many more potential sources of apparent information, including any individual contributing those platforms – and the sheer quantity of sources causes problems of quality. Reporting, debate and opinion are produced and published or broadcast much more rapidly, it is harder to check facts, harder to rebut falsehoods or seek clarity. Moreover, social media platforms are not held to the same standards of quality and professionalism that mainstream media outlets still, in the main, strive to uphold.

Despite this expansion of sources of reporting and debate and the acknowledgment and easily accessible evidence that social media platforms are often unreliable sources of reporting on political, economic, social and cultural matters, we see a reluctance to engage intellectually; an undermining or weakening of what Harvey Siegel has called "The Critical Spirit". In his 2005 paper, Arguments that Backfire, Daniel Cohen, citing Tannen, 1998, remarks on the conventional wisdom that we live in an Argument Culture. Fourteen years on, it is probably fair to say that that culture is deeply entrenched in public life to the extent that it's an *argumentative* culture. And, as Cohen says, argument occurs in its adversarial and pejorative guises, but much less frequently in the guise of critical engagement. In that 2005 paper Cohen goes on to remark that a benefit of that reluctance to engage has been a tendency to tolerate sectarian differences rather than fight over them, but today we witness erosion of that tolerance in the face of populist scare-mongering. So this looks like a moment to double-down on the value of critical thinking generally and of good argumentation more specifically.

Something else that this current state of affairs throws into sharp relief is the emotional genealogy of many of our deeply embedded commitments, such as those that are shaped and influenced by fear or resentment and ignore, misrepresent or deny relevant evidence. Examples are easy enough to identify: Communities with proportionately small immigrant populations will often demonstrate the strongest anti-immigration attitudes. Against the backdrop of a growing tendency to distrust expertise and reject authority, vaccination rates are dropping in some countries, and we see measles epidemics in places where the disease had been more or less eradicated. Cases such as these demonstrate the way in which (mis)perceptions can trump

facts and lived experiences when they serve to reinforce fears and prejudices or confirm stereotypes or biases.

3. DEEPLY-HELD COMMITMENTS

In Richard Paul's account of deep sense critical thinking, the ability to apply critical thinking techniques to one's own deeply-held beliefs takes centre stage (Paul, 1992). Here, while I borrow the idea of depth and entrenchment I also want to acknowledge that the commitments to which we are deeply attached and which we often fail to submit to critical scrutiny are complex commitments that have both cognitive and non-cognitive aspects. Commitments such as these can both derive from and contribute to our sense of self. Thus we often feel heavily invested in such commitments and they form part of our identity. Unsurprisingly given the ways in which they tend to be acquired, and given our unwillingness to subject them to critical scrutiny, they are prone to prejudice, implicit bias, confirmation bias, stereotypes and bias. These egocentric commitments make us more vulnerable to dog whistle politics, to manipulation and to propaganda. They are often acquired from and with our communities, and reinforced by them.. The depth of these commitments may be due to the way they have been acquired and reinforced via our upbringing and by people who have been influential in our lives – parents and other family members, teachers, religious and cultural leaders, our social or professional peers, or because they have been formed on the basis of our own lived experiences that serve consistently to reinforce them. They are part of what Wittgenstein calls the "mythology" that provides the narrative environment within which our cognitive and affective development take place. Wittgenstein 1969, §s95, 97. We may demonstrate a tendency to cling tightly to them coupled with an unwillingness to subject them to reflection. Of course, there is emotional and social comfort in holding onto commitments shared by those around us and with whom we regularly interact, and we take an emotional and social risk if we attempt to challenge their positions. The way in which we are emotionally attached to commitments such as these and the resulting way in which they often go unquestioned, can leads to cognitive illusions that generate fallacious reasoning.

For example, as part of research into the extent to which students who had taken our University of Waikato introductory, one-semester critical thinking course had developed the ability to bring critical scrutiny to bear on their own deeply-held commitments. Student participants were engaged via a one-on-one interview in arguments about the morality of eating meat. Many of the participants were from farming backgrounds. Agriculture in the Waikato region centres on

dairy production and dry stock. For many of them, meat-eating as a practice had always been, and remained, unquestioned. In the discussions we elicited we observed a tendency to commit the fallacy of ought from is or to make appeal to tradition. Meat-eating was frequently referred to as 'something we've always done'.

Our confidence in commitments that play this role in our lives, is often unjustified for it isn't earned by participating reasonably and by holding them up to critical scrutiny. In Paul's terms, we exhibit a lack of deep-sense critical thinking. My claim is not that those commitments that have an emotional aspect are misplaced or unjustified. Indeed, in the current *Zeitgeist*, emotions such as anger, fear and hope are deeply pertinent and a reasonable response to the political, social and cultural events and discourses that we witness and participate in, but without the stability of rational scrutiny, they remain easily manipulated and prone to being erroneous or inappropriate.

There are no necessary or sufficient conditions for a commitment's being deeply held. (Kingsbury and Bowell, 2016). Some markers may be present, but aren't necessarily. Their content can be widely diverse. They are formed in various ways and may be held, expressed, and defended passionately; held, expressed and defended dogmatically, and may play a fundamental role in the way we represent the world to ourselves.

4. THE VIRTUES OF A VIRTUE-BASED ACCOUNT OF ARGUMENTATION

It is not principally because of the lack of an ability to recognise a valid inference or to recognise or avoid a fallacy that the critical spirit has been occluded. Standard approaches to critical thinking and argumentation have proved poorly equipped to confront the challenges of these types of deeply held commitments, which often prove immune to the tools and techniques of good critical thinking (Goldberg, Kingsbury, Bowell and Howard, 2015; Bowell, 2016). An virtue-based approach to good argumentation, such as those advocated in, among others, Cohen 2005 and Aberdein 2010, offers better prospects for engaging properly and effectively with commitments to which we have a deep emotional attachment. On the face of it, virtue argumentation's re-orientation towards the arguer herself and towards the question of what kind of arguer one should be, together with its emphasis on responsible argument, on being willing to engage, to listen, to modify one's position and to question the obvious points to a way of critically engaging with deeply held commitments that is better able to acknowledge and take account of their affective elements and to recognise when a particular commitment is justified and when it represents a rational response to a situation or to a claim.

Cohen, an early proponent of this approach to explaining good argumentation, identifies the following virtues of the ideal arguer:

1. *Willingness to engage in argumentation*
2. *Willingness to listen to others*
3. *Willingness to modify one's own position*
4. *Willingness to question the obvious* (Cohen, 2005, p. 64)

This way of characterising good arguing immediately draws attention to the motivational element of argumentative virtues, an element that is front and centre of virtue theories more generally. That element marks a crucial difference between virtues and skills – one might possess a skill, but be unmotivated to use it. For example, I possess skills as a cook. I once earned a living as a cook, but often I lack the motivation to employ my skills, opting to prepare something that requires minimal culinary wherewithal, or ordering take out. It is this lack of motivation to employ the skills they may have developed and refined in critical thinking courses that we see in students who have completed those courses successfully yet seem unable to employ those skills in contexts beyond the classroom and coursework. By contrast, the habits of good thinking and argumentation that constitute the virtues of argumentation encompass the motivations to inquire and argue at all, to do it well and in the service of good ends. Virtuous arguers are also motivated to seek a balance appropriate to the context of the argument situation and their role within it, between these habits, be it as a proponent of a position, a respondent, or an audience member or bystander.

An agent-centred approach to good argumentation offers a richer account of good argument, embedding recognition that argumentation is practised by people and consists of exchanges between people. It is better conceived to accommodate and recognise arguments as conversations (written and oral) between discussants who rarely come to the discussion as purely rational thinkers with their skills finely-honed by intensive conceptual and practical training in the skills of argumentation. This approach also allows for, and enables us better to recognise that we come to many discussions with emotional responses, both to what's said and to each other, and with our biases, both conscious and unconscious, intact. Of course, these are attitudes and reactions that can be counter-productive to arriving at reasoned judgements and understandings of the world and of each other. We need an awareness of the effects of our responses and biases in ourselves and in others, and strategies for dealing with them. There is nothing wrong with being passionate, but a sense of proportion and the ability to control or channel our passions to direct our thinking and acting towards the right outcomes is crucial to their having a positive role to play in good inquiry and argumentation., For instance, if

someone feels anger and frustration at a particular injustice, that emotional response might motivate them to work to argue against the injustice and work to find a solution.

An approach centred on the virtues of good argumentation also offers a framework that enables us to see what's lacking in the way we argue and in the way we respond to the arguments of others. It can show us what we do well and what we could do better by offering tools that identify what's going wrong in cases of poor argumentation and inquiry. In the next section I bring this idea to bear in a broad sense on cases in current socio-political discourses. But before moving on to that, we should turn to identifying which habits of good argumentation and inquiry the argumentative virtues are. Perhaps, the most comprehensive and well-known account is Andrew Aberdein's. He builds on Cohen's virtues of the ideal arguer and draws on Linda Zagzebski's responsibilist account of intellectual virtue to expand on and refine the traits more thickly delineated by Cohen, thereby producing a typology of the argumentative virtues that cluster around Cohen's set of four motivations, as laid out here. (I have truncated Aberdein's typology here. The complete version can be found at 2016, p. 415):

Table 1

Willingness to Engage	**Willingness to Listen to Others**
Intellectual courage Having faith in reason Being communicative	The ability to recognise the salient facts Sensitivity to detail Open-mindedness Fairness Intellectual empathy The ability to recognise reliable authority
Willingness to Modify One's Own Position	**Willingness to Question the Obvious**
Epistemic humility Intellectual integrity Intellectual candour Common sense	Appropriate respect for public opinion Autonomy Intellectual Perseverance - Diligence, care and thoroughness

Cohen reminds us that good argumentation consists of practices that are conducive to cognitive achievements broader than the pursuit of truth. (2007 p. 6) Similarly, Zabzebski (2001) argues that traditional epistemology has tended to lose sight of the value of understanding having privileged the traditional account of knowledge as justified true belief. In the same vein, standard accounts of good argument privilege validity and truth over understanding. By the lights of those accounts, one might be presented with a good argument, one might even identify it as such, be aware that one should be persuaded by it, yet not understand, or fully understand, the position argued for. This is particularly pertinent to my interests here, because the questions upon which I am focussed are nested in broader questions about how we can best understand each other, particularly across differences, and the limits on our efforts to do so responsibly.

To demonstrate the way in which a virtue-oriented approach to good argumentation and inquiry offers a valuable framework for seeing what goes wrong and what can be improved in arguing and inquiring about contentious issues about which commitments are deeply held, I consider some familiar examples from discussion of current events, such as Brexit, and immigration. It is fair to say, I think, that there is a swarm of falsehoods (some spread deliberately) and misrepresentations in these discussions, a good number of which have wrongly gained the currency of truth. Those who put the case for or against the UK's exit from the European Union or who argue an anti-immigrant or anti-asylum-seeker agenda may manifest a lack of open-mindedness; an unwillingness to consider alternative positions and to revise their own position when presented with the facts or with a stronger alternative. They manifest a lack of intellectual humility; an unwillingness to be open to being mistaken and to learn from others, particularly those on the wrong side of political and social power imbalances. They demonstrate an inability to recognise salient facts, and, if they are aware of the facts yet are ignoring or denying them, a lack of integrity that shades into a moral, as well as an argumentative, failing.

For their part, agents who constitute the audience for these arguments, in this case, the general public engaged in thinking about issues such as Brexit and migration, might demonstrate their lack of autonomy by unquestionably accepting arguments without seeking justification for doing so, or a lack of inquisitiveness by failing to fully acquaint themselves with the evidence for the positions argued for. Connectedly, they might lack the intellectual courage to seek out that evidence or to challenge positions advocated by either those who enjoy more social or political capital, or by those whom they want to avoid offending or otherwise upsetting. The ability to recognise reliable

authority is another element of responsible argumentation that is frequently missing from the ways in which arguments are received and responded to. The challenge of correctly acknowledging authority and expertise is intensified by the way in which, for many people, social media is the principal source of information and site of discussion of current issues. And, as we have seen, an overarching motivation to care about finding out how things actually are, to want to understand the world and others, and take the trouble and care to do so has to be triggered in order for the more finely delineated argumentative virtues to develop and manifest.

A recent case illustrates these points well: a former minister in the British government argued that funds for international development should be radically cut and redistributed to domestic priorities. To support her position that international development funds are wasted, she cited the case of an airport runway that was built with funding from the UK government , which she claimed was 'built facing the wrong way'. When asked in an interview where that had happened, she responded, 'It's in …one of the continents…abroad.' As it turned out, the runway in question is in St Helena, which is a UK overseas Territory and thus doesn't receive 'foreign aid', as McVey had referred to the funding. Moreover, according to those responsible at the time the runway was built, it functions well given the (often extreme) wind conditions on the island. https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2019/06/watch-esther-mcvey-has-no-idea-where-she-claims-foreign-aid-misspent
For the audience of that TV interview (the claims were also repeated elsewhere), in the absence of any critical spirit being bought to bear, damage is already done because the truth is still getting dressed when the misrepresentation has already pulled on its boots and headed out of the door. Intellectual courage, autonomy, care, thoroughness, recognition of reliable authority all need to come in to play if the example of the runway is to be properly understood as not supporting McVey's case for cutting international development funding. By happy contrast, these were manifested by the journalists, and others, who laid out the facts and tracked down authoritative sources to show the truth of the matter and to enable those people motivated to engage critically that McVey was at best ignorant, at worst disingenuous and lacking in integrity.

5. LIMITS OF RESPONSIBILITY?

In this section, I address three different types of cases in which I think we might run up against the limits of obligations to inquire and argue responsibly. In each type of case we encounter instances of vicious argumentation, and I consider whether these are points at which the

responsible move is withdraw from engagement.[1] This may seem antithetical to the critical spirit, since the tradition of critical inquiry is to at least attempt to continue to the (bitter) end, to assume that reason will out and that argument itself offers a way of resolving deep differences. On the face of it, on a virtue-based account of good argumentation, a good arguer, a responsible inquirer, would engage not only with an arguer who simply lacks the argumentative virtues, but also with the vicious arguer who displays argumentative vice rather than virtue. The types of cases I will consider – denier discourses, common-or-garden bigotry and argument contexts where an asymmetrical power dynamic is in play – seem, however, to offer examples of situations where there may be justification for withdrawing critical engagement.

Denier Discourses, for example, Holocaust denial, climate change denial, denials that school shootings at Sandy Hook and other locations were genuine, and anti-vaxxer discourses, are often thought of as conspiracy theories. While they tend to involve at least one conspiracy theory, that rarely gives a complete account of what is in play. Denier discourses seem to be instances of vicious argumentation, usually involving a certain kind of bigotry.[2] This can be seen in more detail if we consider the various roles one might play within such discourses. Commonly, the denier herself may display intellectual dishonesty, a lack of intellectual integrity and a refusal to recognise reliable authority. Deniers often perceive themselves as intellectually courageous; as brave truth-seekers taking on, variously, 'the experts', 'the Establishment', 'the Elite', 'vested interests', or mainstream media. The denial move itself, denial of that which has been established on the basis of reliable evidence constitutes an indifference to the salient facts. Some of the virtues identified by Cohen as characteristic of the ideal arguer are displayed, but they are misplaced and deployed in ways that are inconsistent with the critical spirit. Clearly, the denier demonstrates a willingness to question the obvious. And seeking more evidence might be appropriate given a particular context, but she fails to display a willingness to listen to others or to modify her own positon in the face of relevant evidence or positons stronger than her own. She is willing to engage in argumentation, but, as I have noted, not in ways that would suggest she is properly driven by a desire to achieve the ends associated with the critical spirit.

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[1] Andrew Aberdein has developed an account of argumentative vices parallel to his account of argumentative virtues. See his 2016.

[2] Of course, there is a rich body of work on conspiracy theories in epistemology and psychology, among others. Here my interest is limited to denier discourses qua arguments and (pseudo)inquires as to whether or not some generally accepted fact(s) is true.,

Those amongst the audience for denier claims who are prepared to give credence to those claims to the extent of coming to adopt them as their own demonstrate an excess of open-mindedness which becomes gullibility. They also show a lack of common sense by being prepared to accept claims that lack credible evidence and to deny truths supported by sound, verifiable evidence, that is often scientific. Add to that a lack of perseverance, care and diligence – a responsible inquirer would persevere to find evidence other than hearsay and conspiracy theory for claims that are so clearly the converse of that to which the weight of evidence points. They would recognise that the burden of proof sits with the denier and seek to find ways in which it is met.

The anti-vaccination case shows the way in which the non-cognitive aspects of our deeply-held convictions can make us susceptible to accepting and acting on denier-type claims. Parents who are fearful about their children's well-being for some reason or other, and these could be well-grounded fears, are more likely to be open to considering anti-vaccination arguments and once those arguments intensify their fears, less likely to have their children vaccinated. Once the fear of the side-effects of vaccination is in play, it becomes harder to recognise the differences in the strength and quality of the evidence for the value of vaccinations compared with that of the evidence for some kind of wholesale risk of vaccinations that is central to most anti-vaccination claims.

Denial discourses often discredit victims and witnesses. This has become increasingly common in the case of mass shootings, especially school shootings, where deniers have claimed, inter alia, that the victims, survivors, and others involved, such as first-responders attending the scene and parents of the wounded and murdered, were actors who were part of an event staged to look like a mass murder to promote gun control, among others. Those courageous, or angry, enough to argue against and try to prove that these claims are false, display many of the motivations and habits of inquiry associated with the critical spirit. For example, the denial theory that the Sandy Hook school shootings didn't take place has been promulgated not only via social media, but also via a book (Fetzer & Palacek, 2016) Initially the parents of children at the school, including parents of children who were murdered, ignored the claims, attempting to spare themselves further suffering. But some had had enough of being bullied and harassed and sued for defamation. So they have bought cases against some of the deniers. One of these, bought by a father who the book falsely alleged, faked his son's death certificate, was recent found in his favour, while at least one more case is ongoing. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/18/nyregion/sandy-hook-victim-court-ruling.htmlThe case itself required judicial standards of proof to

be found for the complainant and the authors' claims were thus subjected to standards of reason and failed to meet them.

The second type of case to consider here is best thought of as common-or-garden bigotry, for example the British Prime-Minister, Boris Johnson's comment, made before he became PM, but on which he has since doubled-down, that Muslim women who wear the burqa resemble letterboxes; or his description of gay men as 'tank-topped bum boys' https://www.businessinsider.com.au/boris-johnson-record-sexist-homophobic-and-racist-comments-bumboys-piccaninnies-2019-6?r=US&IR=T or a neighbour or colleague who proclaims that immigrants are taking all the jobs, that refugees aren't really victims of persecution, get all the best housing, shouldn't be entitled to any financial support from the state, and are mainly criminals. Should the responsible enquirer critically engage with these comments? If one's response is simply to call out the racism or homophobia, is one really engaging critically? Certainly doing so identifies the attitude as something harmful (possibly as hate speech), but what then? First off, the act of calling-out does not in itself seem to bear the overarching hallmarks of being motivated to inquire well, the four types of willingness identified by Cohen as characterising the ideal arguer. Critical engagement requires something more – acting in a way that enacts the virtues considered above, in a good measure appropriate to context and to one's (albeit shifting) role in a discussion or debate.

In the case of someone who may be subject to the influence of the bigot, but who doesn't isn't committed to the same attitudes in a deeply entrenched way, and demonstrates a willingness to engage in practices that *aim* to be properly critical and bring to bear the attendant virtues, as relevant to role and context, it does seem worthwhile to engage critically. For in those cases we are presented with an opportunity to influence attitudes and standpoints for the better and perhaps also to motivate at least some people to act in ways that address false claims or affect a situation for the better. But is there value in critical engagement when the other party does not engage on the same terms? When they aren't motivated to listen, to modify their position, to question what's seems obvious from their standpoint, where they hold deeply entrenched positions that they know cause offence and may lead to harm? Indeed, in some such cases the positon might not even be held that deeply, but is being used cynically and to serve self-interests. Politicians and propagandists frequently seek to influence their audience in this way. There is also a practical question as to whether it is worthwhile engaging when the terms of engagement aren't shared, when only one party to the discussion is motivated to argue, to listen to others, to modify their position and to question the obvious.

I have noted that the virtues required to make inquiry responsible will shift according to a person's role in a discussion and the context of that discussion. Moreover, there may be aspects of an inquirer's role and of the context of inquiry that should, at least, give rise to caution about the type and extent of her engagement. In the final part of this presentation, I draw from work by Gail Pohlhaus (Jr) in feminist epistemology. In her 2011 paper Wrongful Requests and Strategic Refusals to Engage, Pohlhaus argues that there are cases in which requests to engage epistemically can be harmful. These are cases where a request takes place in contexts of power asymmetries such that the marginalised are being asked to engage from a positon of vulnerability, specifically where they are asked to attempt to understand the standpoint of the dominant – to see where they might be coming from. Pohlhaus draws on two cases of feminist scholars' personal experiences which they discuss in their work: Patricia Williams' experience of racial profiling on attempting to enter a Benetton store (Williams, 1992) and Susan Brison's experience of attempted murder and sexual assault. (Brison, 2001) In each case requests for engagement occur in the context of Collins and Brison telling their stories and their interlocutors expecting them to extend epistemic empathy to the perpetrators or detractors. Pohlhaus comments,

> In such cases it is worth noticing that there is something peculiarly epistemically violent about situations where someone is forced or even asked to understand the world in ways that asymmetrically limit her agency. (2011, 237)

She also notes the way in which extending empathy in such a context requires double consciousness. The marginalised person, who is the victim in the situation, is expected to inhabit two worlds - her own marginalised one in which her agency is limited, as well as that of the racist or rapist who is the perpetrator of harm and trauma against her.

A series of cases news of which became public in Aotearoa/New Zealand this year demonstrate the way in which the responsibility not to perpetrate argumentative harm may run up against the demands of critical engagement, such that in particular contexts, it becomes irresponsible to expect or try to elicit critical engagement on anything other than terms determined by the people who are marginalised in that context. The cases I have in mind involve the forced removal of babies from young Māori mothers by Oranga Tamariki , the Ministry for Children. The most publicised case involved a young woman and her new-born baby who were still in hospital when social workers deceived her whānau (extended family) into leaving the ward, removed her midwife's hospital access, and used police to remove the baby, who was

subsequently placed in foster care despite the desire and ability of the child's whānau to care for it. The mother, the baby and her whānau were made extremely vulnerable and their agency was clearly limited.

To be asked to understand the agency's position, as some commentators demanded, to understand that it has a responsibility to protect, and that its employees have a duty to perform, is a form of harm. Responsible inquiry does not include the expectation of a willingness on the part of the marginalised to engage critically on these socially and politically unjust terms, to listen to the voices of dominance and oppression, to modify their stance or to question the obvious . Other possible examples include rape cases where the victim's dress, or the fact that they were intoxicated, or had used recreational drugs is cited as some kind of mitigating factor and the victim is asked to engage with and to lend their understanding to the idea that they somehow contributed to their own harm.

In such instances there is an expectation of intellectual empathy, of open-mindedness, of intellectual humility, of fairness, of faith in reason, of intellectual integrity coupled with a need for excessive amounts of intellectual courage and of intellectual autonomy that is asymmetric with the absence of appropriate virtues on the part of the dominant in the discourse who demonstrate a lack of intellectual humility, a lack of the ability to recognise the salient facts, and to discount irrelevancies, and a lack of integrity, fairness, and intellectual empathy. I also suggest that what happens in such situations is that the enactment of argumentative vices occurs at a structural level; whereas the expectation of empathetic critical engagement - demands for understanding - come to bear at the level of individuals with the consequence that power asymmetries take on an additional dimension. When developing her argument that these types of demands for engagement are themselves a form of epistemic violence, Pohlhaus draws on Maria Lugones' insight that the worlds of the oppressed are lived out within the structures of the worlds of the dominant. (Lugones, 2003) Cases such as those discussed briefly here – where the critical engagement of the already maginalised is demanded in contexts located within state systems, such as the courts and child protection agencies, that help to reinforce and perpetuate that marginalisation, seem readily to exemplify Lugones' insight, as does the way in which they employ the language and concepts that both emerge from and structure those worlds. Responsible engagement, then, requires acknowledgment and careful, self-reflexive, navigation of those differences. Pohlhaus argues that by fore-grounding oppressive worlds, refusals to understand can lead to better understanding of how they are perpetuated. (238)

I will end by returning to the question of whether responsible inquiry requires critical engagement with racist, sexist, homophobic,

trans-phobic, anti-semitic, islamaphobic, and any other forms of bigotry. Terms of engagement that contribute to a better understanding of why a position is bigoted and wrong are useful and contribute to argumentative and ethical goals. But terms of engagement that presume an over-extension of virtues such as open-mindedness, inquisitiveness and fairness, that would have us debate racist claims as though there really were two sides at stake risk argumentative harm and, while such debates may share superficial similarities with critical thinking, they make no genuine contribution to achieving the ends associated with the critical spirit.

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