Norms of Engagement

If you pay attention to political discussions in the U.S., you've probably noticed (especially, but not only, on social media) the following: such discussions often become very heated. They frequently involve shaming people, "cancelling them," calling them out, claims that someone should "check their privilege," diagnosis of people's suspect motivations for holding certain beliefs, etc. As I'm sure you know, people debate the extent to which our culture and politics have become polarized, the degree to which the types of discussions referred to in the previous sentence are indicative of that, and whether this is good for our society. I have a view about this and suspect you do too. But regardless of our views on the polarization question with respect to the broader society, **in this class** I'm going to do everything I possibly can to facilitate discussions that abide by different norms. I'm also going to grade your essays with these different norms in mind. What norms am I talking about?

The norms I have in mind will be familiar to anyone who has studied critical thinking, especially in a philosophy department. They're the norms which govern the construction and evaluation of arguments. By "arguments" I mean sets of claims along with the reasons offered in support of them. To spell out a bit more what I'm getting at, let's go over the items below:

1) The principle of fallibility.
2) The principle of truth seeking.
3) You can come to any conclusion you want to about the issues we'll discuss in class.
4) It's my hope, however, that you'll support any conclusion you come to with what you regard as good reasons for believing it.
5) If you disagree with the conclusion of someone's argument and/or the reasons they offered in support of it, please address the content of that person's argument instead of personally attacking them for having made it. As you criticize the person's argument, please do so by offering what you regard as good reasons to support the conclusion of your counterargument. Also, merely pointing out a person's motives, or possible motives for making an argument, isn't an evaluation of the content of that person's argument. I'll give an example in class of what I mean.
6) Others have the right to criticize your arguments in the manner I spelled out in rule 5).
7) Please accept the principle of charity. That is, if someone says something that could be taken as racist/sexist/heterosexist/transphobic, etc. or it could be taken in a more benign way, please entertain the possibility that it was meant in this more benign way. Ideally, you should ask for clarification before assuming the comment was meant in the less benign way. Also, try to address the strongest version of the argument someone is presenting. That is, if someone is making a weak argument but you think they might mean something stronger, address the stronger version of their argument. I'll say more about this in class.
8) Some of the things we'll discuss in this course are highly contentious. This means we'll cover topics people have very strong views about. Given this, it may, at times, be difficult for us to hold to rules 1-7 (**well I'll hold to them because it's my job to do so**). If you feel you're faced with this situation, you may want to do at least one of the following:

a) Recall that others are as committed to their views as you are to yours, even when you think their views are as wrong as any set of ideas can possibly be. Just remembering this can sometimes keep you focused on the content of what someone has to say instead of succumbing to

the impulse to personally attack them for saying it.

b) Count to 10 (as my grandmother used to say) and hope you've calmed down by the time you get to 10. 🙂

c) Step out of the class (well, these days, out of Zoom) for a moment or longer and gather yourself.