

## 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 are those which govern the construction and evaluation of arguments. By "arguments" I mean sets of claims supported by the reason (s) for making them. To spell out a bit more what I'm getting at, let's go over the numbered items below:

- 1) Please accept the principle of fallibility.
- 2) Please accept 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.
- 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.
- 8) Some of the things we'll discuss in this course are highly contentious. This means we'll cover topics people have very strong but diverging 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 these other 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 for a moment or longer and gather yourself.

I have a philosopher colleague named Olufemi O. Taiwo who teaches courses similar to the ones I teach. On all his syllabi he includes the following:

**“I promise you all to do my best to raise philosophical issues and to start philosophical discussions in ways that are as sensitive as possible to the variety of viewpoints and opinions that we are sure to find among the members of this class.”**

Although this is a course in a school of social work and not a department of philosophy, many of the issues we'll discuss overlap with philosophy. In fact, several of the readings I'll assign were written by philosophers. So, I'm going to make the same promise to you that Olufemi makes in this quote to his students. The reason I make it is, I believe, why Olufemi does so too.

Although, perhaps, not everyone would agree, my role as instructor isn't to spend a lot of time promoting my personal views about the topics we'll address in the course. That's not to say I don't have such views; I have views about almost everything we'll cover. What I'm saying is that I'll mainly try to facilitate discussions about these topics in such a way that we'll end up spending most of our time discussing your views, instead of mine. This means that I'll often raise questions, probe for answers from you, provide overviews of answers found in the academic literature, try to get you to engage with each other, try to get you to engage with and respond to objections to your views, etc. I think the best way for me to do all this is by keeping the promise I spelled out in bold above.