

Andrei Bespalov, Pompeu Fabra University, “Civility and Implicit Bias in Public Justification”

Public reason liberals hold that showing respect for fellow citizens as free and equal partners in self-government requires political decision-makers to publicly justify their policy preferences in ways that make them reasonably acceptable to all citizens. I discuss what this duty of civility entails for publicly attributing the positions of one’s political opponents to their implicit biases, understood as stereotypes and prejudices that can be registered only indirectly and are difficult to control.

Firstly, I note that attributing implicit biases to political opponents is extremely counterproductive. Imagine Alf who derives Betty’s proposal to significantly raise taxes and increase social spending from her implicit resentment against the rich. Betty, in her own turn, derives Alf’s opposition to increased taxes and social spending from his implicit racism. These argumentative tactics cut short the exchange of substantive reasons for and against concrete policies and lead to a stalemate, where the parties quarrel about which one of them needs to undergo de-biasing before the discussion can move forward. To underscore the seriousness of the problem, I show that, apparently, none of the two major models of public justification (i.e., the Rawlsian consensus model and the Gaussian convergence model) offers the criteria of proper public reasoning that would allow to exclude implicit bias arguments from political debates.

Secondly, as a matter of a solution, I argue that public reason liberals still can and should exclude implicit bias arguments from the pool of proper public reasons on the grounds that using them contradicts the duty of civility at the very basic level, regardless of how this duty is specified by one or another model of public justification. In particular, I argue that the public expression of respect for individuals requires charitable interpretation of what they say and do. To draw an analogy, publicly claiming that some apparently upright person is in fact a calculating hypocrite or a Dostoevskian “idiot” is strikingly impolite towards that person, or, in other words, it is incompatible with expressing a respectful attitude to her as a moral subject. Similarly, when the reasoning of one’s political opponents involves no apparently racist, sexist, or otherwise bigoted claims, discrediting it as a mere rationalization of some hidden phobias and desires for domination is incompatible with showing civic respect for the opponents. It is incompatible with publicly recognizing them as free and equal partners in the joint exercise of political power.

Finally, I respond to the worry that prohibiting the parties to political debates from exposing one another’s implicit biases might be conducive to biased partisan intransigence covered up by ide-ological rationalizations. I contend that the worry is unsubstantiated. On the contrary, the prohibition of implicit bias arguments deprives the parties to political debates

of the most comfortable pretext for misinterpreting one another's reasons, remaining unresponsive to them, and evading reciprocity in public justification.