Civility in the Post-Truth Age: An Aristotelian Account

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates civility from an Aristotelian perspective and has two objectives. The first is to offer a novel account of this virtue based on Aristotle's remarks about civic friendship. The proposed account distinguishes two main components of civility–civic benevolence and civil deliberation–and shows how Aristotle's insights can speak to the needs of our communities today. The notion of civil deliberation is then unpacked into three main dimensions: motivational, inquiry-related, and ethical. The second objective is to illustrate how the post-truth condition–in particular, the spread of misinformation typical of the digital environments we inhabit–obstructs our capacity to cultivate the virtue of civility by impairing every component of civil deliberation. The paper's overall ambition is to direct virtue theorists' attention to the need to foster civic virtues as a means of counteracting the negative aspects of the post-truth age.

The most recent wave of virtue-theoretic research has brought attention to a range of new–or, at least, underexplored–issues about human character. To name just a few, a lot has been said about putting theoretical conceptions of character on psychologically robust foundations, investigating moral and epistemic vices, and the specific role that virtues such as humility, trust, honesty, and courage can play today. Nonetheless, it is only in the past few years that virtue theorists have started to reconsider the importance of civic aspects of our character. This is a timely concern–one that relates to deeply problematic aspects of our conduct qua members of our communities–in a couple respects. Several recent political events reveal nationalistic and antidemocratic turns in various countries. And for the tenth year in a row, citizens of the digital world have experienced a deterioration of their rights, most recently accelerated by the

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COVID-19 pandemic (Shahbaz and Funk 2020) and infodemic, as the World Health Organization warned us at the beginning of 2020.[1]

Thus, today, more than ever, it seems appropriate for virtue theorists to ask whether there is anything we can do to improve the welfare of our communities, which is threatened by—among other things—a significant deterioration of the quality of interactions among citizens. This paper has two main goals: namely, raising awareness of the civic traits of our character qua citizens of the digital world and illustrating how the current problems affecting democratic societies have seriously damaged our capacity to take part in the life of our communities and deliberate with other citizens.

We shall pursue these goals in the two main sections. In section 1, we outline a novel account of civility grounded in Aristotle's remarks about civic friendship and its components. After a brief overview of the current debate about civic virtues in the Aristotelian tradition (§1.1), we reconstruct Aristotle's take on civic friendship (§1.2) and show how we can derive a theory of civility that can speak to the needs of our societies while staying true to the original spirit of Aristotle's conception (§1.3).[2] According to our account, civility consists of two main components, one epistemic (civil deliberation) and one moral (civic benevolence). In §1.4, we offer an in-depth analysis of civil deliberation, which we consider to be particularly at risk of being impaired by the peculiar problems we are exposed to qua citizens in the post-truth age. Section 2 pursues the goal of showing how the post-truth condition—in particular, the spread of misinformation typical of the digital environments we inhabit—degrades our capacity to cultivate the virtue of civility by impairing our capacity for civil deliberation. Our hope is that a comprehensive understanding of the various factors threatening the possibility to develop civil attitudes will serve as a first and fundamental building block of a larger project for virtue theorists: that of helping citizens navigate the digital oceans of a post-truth age by fostering virtuous attitudes toward fellow members of their communities.

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[1] See https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/munich-security-conference.
[2] It is important to note that in what follows we do not mean to adjudicate between rival interpretations of Aristotle, nor to assess them on philological grounds; rather, we attempt to draw insights from the Aristotelian texts in order to rebuild a neo-Aristotelian account of civility and civic virtue.

1. Civility: An Aristotelian Account

1.1 Some Background Considerations

Civic virtue, under the name of civility, has been the object of several investigations in ethics and political theory mostly outside the Aristotelian tradition—more specifically, within the republican tradition and in the context of liberal theories of democracy. The latter define civility as "a bond uniting honest men busy minding their own affairs" who are neighborly but who recognize that "good fences do make good neighbors" (Orwin 1991, 560). In a pluralistic society, that is, civility is closely related to tolerance, to the extent that it is equated to "respectful dialogue-keeping a civil tongue" (Calhoun 2000, 256). Other democratic theorists conceive of civic virtues such as political prudence as features of statesmen (Ottonelli 2018).[3]

Nonetheless, various concerns have recently been raised about the notion of civility. Cheshire Calhoun, in a seminal paper, identifies at least three reasons for a suspicion of civility as a civic virtue: (i) its intimate association with good manners; (ii) its apparent closeness to law abidance, or even conformism to established rules, as opposed to the adoption of a socially critical moral point of view; (iii) its naming of a specific virtue, rather than being an attitude underlying a collection of virtues such as tolerance or law abidance (Calhoun 2000, 251–55). The relevance and variety of skeptical concerns raised by Calhoun illustrate that rebuilding the concept of civility upon new and stronger foundations is both an urgent and an effortful task.

Within the neo-Aristotelian field, things are equally complicated. For Aristotle, given the political nature of human beings, leading a good life as a citizen of the polis is a chief—or even the main—educational goal. Suffice it to recall that the highest form of phronesis is the political and that the only real-life example of a phronimos he offers is that of the most famous political leader of his time, Pericles. However, compared to this discussion, Aristotle's treatment of specifically political or civic virtues is surprisingly modest. As is well known, most of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is devoted to listing and discussing ethical and dianoetical, or intellectual, virtues; the treatise on justice in book V has no markedly political flavor; book VI, in which Aristotle develops his

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[3] See also Walzer (1974); Zwiebach (1975); Orwin (1991); Kingwell (1995); Rawls (1971, 1993); Sinopoli (1995). For a brief yet extremely informative reconstruction of the history of the concept, see Angle (1975).

account of phronesis alongside the other intellectual virtues, contains no specific discussion of political phronesis; and there is no civic virtue as such among the ethical virtues of books II–IV, but only a group of more generically social virtues (NE II, 1108b 9–1108 b10; IV, 1126b 10–1128b 9) whose relevance has long been overlooked. As we suggest in §§1.3-1.4, there is ample room for revising this picture, and the most interesting places to look at are precisely some of the social virtues mentioned and the notion of civic friendship that emerges both in *Politics* and in *Nicomachean Ethics*. However, given the general picture that emerges from mainstream readings of *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is not too surprising that neo-Aristotelians have long neglected to elaborate an Aristotelian account of civic virtue.

Recently, though, neo-Aristotelians have started to reconsider the issue, especially in light of the increasing threats to our democracies. It is striking to notice the difference in tone within the span of just two decades. It was as recent as 1998 that Robert Audi claimed that "civic virtue seems less basic than certain other broadly moral traits; it is, for example, constituted largely by fairness, veracity, loyalty, and a measure of benevolence toward fellow citizens" (152). One decade later, several important voices started to reconceive civic virtue in more positive terms. Jason Baehr (2011, 2015) has attempted to give civic virtues the prominence they deserve as a distinct category of virtues; he defines them as "good character traits of a citizen, such as tolerance, respect, and community mindedness" (2015: 38). Howard Curzer (2012) has offered a seminal sketch of civic virtue in Aristotelian terms, and Nancy Snow (2018) has proposed an account of hope as a democratic civic virtue.[4]

A further–and decisive–boost to the discussion has been given in the last couple of years by two attempts to offer a detailed account of civic virtue and its components. The first is that of Peterson (2019), who does so in terms of civility. In his work, he defines civic virtues as "worthwhile traits of character necessary for and expressed within social and political associations . . . that enable citizens to participate well within their democratic community and which, in turn, enable communities to flourish" (9). A central character trait in this respect is political, as opposed to everyday, civility [5] –that is, the virtue concerning "how citizens encounter each other and exchange ideas and interests in the public sphere" (7) and whose scope is wide and includes all the

[4] For further discussion, see, for example, Brudney (2013), Hope (2013), Leontsini (2013), Snow (2020).

[5] Or, as Curzer has it, *political* and *polite* civility.

various social associations to which citizens belong. Peterson identifies two components of political civility. The first is *civil conduct*, which includes "the set of capacities and dispositions that enable citizens to engage with each other" (14), such as sharing interests, seeking to accommodate conflicting interests, being open-minded, and avoiding dogmatism. Civil conduct has a particular bond with deliberation, which entails participation in discursive and dialogic processes. Secondly, civility implies for Peterson *mutual fellow-feeling and well-wishing*–that is, a "partnership between citizens who share a sense of mutual positive regard" (35).

Along the same lines, Curren and Dorn (2018), in what is likely to be the most thorough and systematic account of Aristotelian civic virtue so far, define civic virtues as what "equips people to act well in the civic sphere." They identify three parts of civic virtue. *Civic intelligence* has to do with the formation of good judgment and involves learning not only the basics of civic education but also how to conduct a serious inquiry and make use of it in public discussion–that is, discussion with citizens who might well have diverging opinions (110–11). *Civic friendship* is the moral component of civility and amounts to an attitude of good will one should display toward other members of one's community. More precisely, it involves a "cognitive, emotional, and behavioral disposition to affirm the value and act for the good of the members of one's communities" (114). Finally, *civic competence* has to do with how the capabilities that allow citizens to take part in community-based projects that enhance one's civic environment.

As will become clear in the remainder of section 1, our proposal is in the spirit of the most recent neo-Aristotelian perspectives on civic virtues that we have briefly summarized here. Yet our account introduces two main novel elements to the current discussion. First, in §§1.2-1.3 we sketch a notion of civility directly from Aristotle's account of civic friendship and illustrate how a minimal restyling suffices to tailor his original view to the needs of citizens in our current society. Second, in §1.4 we expand on the deliberative or epistemic dimension of civility–that is, something similar to what Curren and Dorn (2018) call civic intelligence–and unpack it into distinct and trainable components. This analysis is extremely helpful for the argument of section 2, in that it allows us to show how the communicative environment typical of the post-truth age impairs our ability to cultivate civil attitudes by undermining the civic-epistemic components of civility.

1.2 Back to Aristotle

Let us build our account of civility on its bedrock and look back at Aristotle's insights into civic friendship. The place to begin is the discussion of friendship, which extends throughout books VIII and IX of *Nicomachean Ethics*. There, and in the *Politics*, among the forms of friendship based on utility, Aristotle lists the noble bond of *politike philia*, or civic friendship. He defines civic friendship as the basis of society, since "*philia* is the pursuit of a common social life" (*Pol* 1280b38–39), and claims it to be even more important than justice since it generates concord in the city (NE 1155b21–27): "In all communities of exchange, this sort of justice holds people together" (NE 1132b31), and "reciprocity preserves cities" (*Pol* 1261a32). [6] Friendship between fellow citizens, although grounded on the search for utility, is of the highest importance, for it contributes to the unity of both state and community by transmitting feelings of solidarity. Unlike other forms of unintimate relations, civic friendship can bring together many people who are not intimate with each other without degenerating into mutual exploitation or mere flattery: "Those who have many friends, and greet everyone in an intimate fashion, are thought to be friends of nobody, except in the way that fellow-citizens are friends; in fact, people call them obsequious [areskous]. Merely as a citizen, then, one can be a friend to many" (NE 1171a 16–19).

　　　Within a political community, sharing the same institutions and values is a sufficient condition for benevolence toward fellow citizens to occur. The kind of mutual concern and well-wishing that in intimate friendship springs from affection and a shared life is in the unique case of civic friendship supplied by the shared values of the polis, which is itself a kind of (extended) common life in which citizens are concerned about each other's moral goodness. Sharing in the values of the polis allows therefore an extension of practical reason and concern: "A fellow citizen may not be a virtuous person, and therefore may not be another self in the way one virtuous person is for another. Nor does the virtuous person share his life with a mere fellow-citizen to the extent he shares it with a virtuous friend. But if the fellow-citizen is virtuous enough to share some similar aims, the virtuous person can extend his practical reason in the same way as with a virtuous friend" (Irwin 1990, 399).

[6] An extensive discussion of *politike philia* can be found in Eudemian Ethics, Book 7. For more on Aristotle and civic friendship, see, e.g., Cooper 1977, 1990; Fortenbaugh 1975; Walker 1979.

Although civic friendship, being a form of relation, cannot itself be a virtue, we claim that it is the background condition of two virtues not mentioned in the treatise on friendship but discussed in a rather neglected section of *Nicomachean Ethics*. There Aristotle enumerates several nameless social virtues, which have long been seen as merely regulating manners and polite social exchanges; however, if correctly seen against the background of civic friendship, their deep political value emerges. The first is *friendliness* (NE IV, 1126b 10 a 1127a 12), which, together with good will (NE 1166b 30 ff.), is described as friendly behavior, springing from concern for others' well-being, and friendly feeling, directed at people we do not know and without their being aware of it. Clearly enough, having a virtuous disposition toward people we do not know intimately, friendliness and good will are the most suitable candidates for filling the emotional gap between fellow citizens and providing that kind of mutual concern that is said to be essential to civic friendship. The second virtuous trait is *concord* (NE 1167a 22 ff.). Again, concord is said to be "something friendly," but rather than being an emotional bond it obtains when fellow citizens agree on deeply important matters and choose and put into practice the things they have judged rightly together. Thus, it implies a common deliberation over matters of common interest.

In sum, there are two virtuous social dispositions, closely linked with civic friendship to the point of being mutually dependent on it. One of them implies mutual concern and benevolence among fellow citizens, the other a willingness to engage in common deliberation on matters of deep political importance. In light of their striking relevance to the common life of the polis, we suggest that, rather than social, they would be better labeled as civic virtues. In the next section, we redefine these two civic virtues as components of civility and attempt to provide a comprehensive account that builds on Aristotle's remarks and fills in the gaps in his view of civic friendship. We focus on the latter component, which we call civil deliberation, and attempt to explain what kind of conduct we should expect from citizens who care that the polis deliberate well in matters of common interest.

1.3 Aristotelian Civility Today

Before outlining our account of civility, one brief remark about the scope of this project is in order. One might legitimately worry that reconstructing an Aristotelian view of civility is hopeless because our social and political

environment has nothing to do with the polis Aristotle had in mind when thinking about civic friendship.[7] We are well aware that the time of the polis is over. Yet we are confident that an Aristotelian analysis can still offer illuminating insights, for at least three main reasons. For starters, the two virtues identified by Aristotle do not fit a specific political form only, since they name attitudes whose main background condition is the willingness to pursue the general aims of the political community. Paul Ludwig's recent work is precisely an attempt to defend the idea that even we, in our modern society, need to restore an Aristotelian concept of civic friendship, for in practice–despite apparently contrary evidence–such a concept is already in place as a tendency to favor one's fellow-citizens based on a shared love of a common regime or political system (Ludwig 2020: 2). It is, in his words, a "descriptive feature of liberalism" (Ludwig 2020: 6).

Secondly, just as in the rather homogeneous Aristotelian polis, heterogeneous societies such as ours need stability; and this, in turn, depends on a bond among citizens that can only be a friendship in a very specific sense.[8] That is, it is a friendship that does not imply intimacy or proper affection and is pursued in the name of a certain kind of utility: the pursuit and achievement of the flourishing of the political community. Nothing more than this is required for civic friendship and the two related components of civility to obtain. Of course, the political goods we commonly share nowadays are extremely different from Aristotle's since we cannot count on shared common interests, given the diversity among our societies. However, we still need civic friendship and civility in order to treat others and be treated with respect as equal participants to democratic life, to engage in productive discussions, to trust other members of the community, to hear their arguments open-mindedly, and to offer our own views in good faith and with honesty.

Third, it looks as though we do appear to be living in a polis: a *digital polis*. This label is meant to capture two main aspects of our social environment. First–like the ancient Greeks–we constantly interact with people we barely know, and we can contribute to a deliberation that has significant consequences

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[7] In particular, what has faded is a shared concept of paideia, anchored to well-identified ethical values. However, as we are suggesting here, this should not prevent us from drawing insights that, with important adjustments, can still prove fertile today. This conviction is shared, among others, by Ludwig (2020) in his recent important volume on Aristotelian civic friendship in the contemporary context.

[8] On this point, see Peterson (2019, 38–43).

for the welfare of the entire community. We are referring to what Habermas would call the "weak political sphere"—that is, the realm of interactions concerning matters of common importance that take place among citizens (that is, outside institutional settings and the halls of power). Second, these interactions are increasingly taking place in online environments—primarily, social media—as we shall see in section 2.

For these reasons, in the remainder of this paper we try to motivate the thesis that an Aristotelian account of civility is no less important in the context of the digital polis than it was at the time of the ancient Greeks. As a key step in the argument, let us now translate into more contemporary terms the Aristotelian suggestion that civic friendship requires and implies friendliness (with good will) and concord. We propose to define civility as the virtue of fellow citizens who treat each other as civic friends—that is, citizens who display *civic benevolence* and exercise *civil deliberation*. While the former represents the moral component of civility, the latter is epistemic in nature.

As the heir to Aristotelian friendliness, civic benevolence implies good will and concern for the well-being of fellow citizens, motivated by the very fact of being part of a community. Being a virtue, as opposed to a natural trait, it is not a spontaneous feeling, but rather a trainable disposition that needs cultivation and can be threatened by many factors. As for civil deliberation, we conceive of it as more than a virtue related to the good exercise of one's right to vote; it is the broader virtue of giving and receiving reasons within the public sphere in all the contexts in which an exchange of views on matters of common interest is at stake, be it the workplace, a discussion with fellow citizens, or a more formal setting such as the internal debates of an association or political party. Civil deliberation, of course, does not follow political partisanship in requiring that citizens share similar or identical opinions about any civic or political matter. Rather, it amounts to a regulative democratic ideal: forming a common view about key matters for the life of their community (that is, about matters of interest for all members of the community).

In the proposed framework, civic benevolence and civil deliberation, despite being distinct components of civility, cannot stand without one another. The existence of benevolence among fellow citizens supplements civil deliberation with its goal and its very raison d'être, and in turn the exercise of civil deliberation fosters and strengthens benevolence. On the dark side, this means that any threat to either component endangers the other indirectly. The

following figure summarizes our account of the relationships among the concepts mentioned so far.
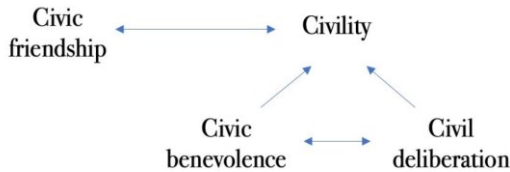
We believe that in present times, the component that is most jeopardized by the communicative dynamics of the post-truth world is our capacity to deliberate with fellow citizens. These days, the wound to civility as civic friendship is opened via its epistemic side; if not healed, it is most likely to widen and to infect the quality of the moral bond among citizens. This is why, in what follows, despite being fully aware that civic benevolence is equally fundamental to the formation of civil behavior and deserves a separate investigation, we focus on supplementing this picture with a deeper understanding of civil deliberation. A detailed inquiry into this component is particularly needed because, as will become clear in section 2, developing this virtue is key to addressing some fundamental problems that affect the communicative dynamics typical of the digital polis.

1.4 Civil Deliberation and Its Components

How can we think of civil deliberation today, if we want to preserve the Aristotelian spirit yet be cognizant of the features of a democratic society? As the heir of Aristotelian concord, civil deliberation is a form of common inquiry— that is, the intellectual activity of reasoning in common on practical matters.[9] It should now become more evident why we think of civil deliberation as a civic-epistemic virtue. For one thing, it belongs to our civic character because it has to do with our agency qua citizens or members of the digital polis. For another, it is epistemic in spirit because it makes us better citizens by helping us become good deliberators or inquirers.

      Civil deliberation as a civic-epistemic virtue can be unpacked into three different components (motivational, inquiry-related, and ethical), each

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[9] "All deliberation is inquiry" (NE III, 3, 1112 b20); "in deliberating, either well or badly, we inquire for something and rationally calculate about it" (NE VI, 9, 1142, b13–15).

perfected by a distinct subvirtue. In general, on our account, being a civil deliberator is a complex activity that requires displaying the appropriate motivation when engaging in mutual inquiry with other fellow citizens, engaging in various deliberative procedures aimed at collecting relevant information and making informed judgments on matters of civic interest, and displaying the appropriate awareness toward the ethical implications of one's actions in the context of joint decision-making processes. Let us analyze these components in more detail.

The motivational component concerns the specific motivation for engaging in deliberation in the first place. A citizen who has such motivation displays the virtue of *civic engagement*. This virtue implies being aptly disposed to take part in the community's deliberation and undertaking the actions required to promote civic benevolence while remaining focused throughout the deliberation. We can conceive of civic passion as a mean between two opposite vices. A vice of deficiency–call it *civic insouciance*–is typical of those who systematically remain silent, never engaging in discussion for fear of being targeted as enemies by acquaintances or colleagues. And a vice of excess–call it *civic irascibility*–affects those who are systematically prone to getting unduly angry about issues of civic import.

The inquiry-related component of civil deliberation amounts to what we call *deliberative conscientiousness*. This virtue helps citizens translate their civic passion into virtuous deliberating procedures by coordinating the interactions between the epistemic dimension and the civic dimension of their inquiries. These interactions involve at least two directions. One goes from the civic to the epistemic and amounts to choosing and managing the inquiring procedures necessary to address a civic issue–from selecting information sources to proving willing and able to revise one's opinion on civically relevant matters when exposed to counterevidence or in the face of disagreement with fellow citizens. The other direction goes from the epistemic to the civic and amounts to acknowledging that the overarching goal of these deliberative procedures is to ensure that a community make the best possible practical decisions for promoting the well-being of its members based on the available epistemic resources.

Presumably, if they are not to work to the detriment of a community's epistemic welfare, some of these decisions have to be made in uncertain epistemic conditions (for example, with limited knowledge of the issue at stake or widespread disagreement about how to address it). Deliberative

conscientiousness provides citizens with an awareness that civic matters have to be grounded in epistemically considerate inquiries but cannot be hostage to epistemic goals. Thus, this virtue allows citizens to make their intellectual virtues work for the relevant civic goal and achieve such goals even when the situation doesn't allow them to meet ancillary epistemic goals.

Deliberative conscientiousness can be conceived of as the virtuous mean between two main vices: deliberative negligence and deliberative paralysis. *Deliberative negligence* is the vice of those who culpably fail to acknowledge that the success of civil deliberation rests on epistemically well-founded inquiries. One can be blamed for this failing to the extent that one is systematically unwilling to recognize that one indulges in bad reasoning (and unwilling to recognize that this is detrimental to one's civic participation) and to revise one's attitudes. In this respect, deliberative negligence is perfectly compatible with civic passion, as a citizen might well be interested in—even passionate about— the well-being of her community but fail to acknowledge that her judgments about some ethnical minorities in her community are biased.

Deliberative paralysis stands at the opposite side of the spectrum, as it is the vice of those who are unable to make any practical decision about some civic matter unless that decision is based on rock-solid epistemic grounds. Specifically, deliberative paralysis is the condition affecting those agents who have already secured important epistemic achievements but have to deliberate based on partial knowledge only. Deliberative paralysis can be considered as a vice to the extent that epistemic agents are responsible for failing to reach a decision in the context of a deliberative process. That is, it becomes a vice when they consciously—but unjustifiedly—postpone the deliberative stage of their inquiries in the hopes of collecting a conclusive body of evidence or knowledge and deliberating on rock-solid epistemic grounds.

Finally, *conversational responsibility* is the subvirtue related to the ethical component of civil deliberation; its goal is to ensure that citizens debate in a way that promotes civic benevolence. For one thing, this virtue helps one acknowledge that fellow citizens are owed mutual respect qua members of the community and prima facie credibility qua epistemic agents. For another, responsible discussion makes one aware of what taking a public stance on a subject implies both for accountability for what one asserts and for the influence that one's opinion might have on other community members. As a consequence, responsible discussion also requires that one engage in discussion by offering arguments and reasons in support of one's stance. Failing to do so amounts to a

lack of respect for the deliberative capacities of one's interlocutors and worsens the quality of public deliberation.

Responsible discussion allows its possessor to avoid two vicious extremes: on the one hand, a vice of deficiency—call it *conversational carelessness*—typical of those who underestimate the effects of their behavior in public debate and demonstrate no respect for fellow citizens and their opinion in deliberation; on the other, a vice of excess—call it *conversational hypersensitivity*—typical of those who overestimate the impact of their actions in public debate as a result of a disproportionately high sense of responsibility for what they assert and how they behave in public.

The following table summarizes the components, subvirtues, and corresponding subvices of civil deliberation.

Component	Virtues	Vices
Motivational	*Civic Engagement* Being aptly motivated to take part in the community's deliberation process; remaining focused throughout the process; being disposed to undertake the actions required to promote civic benevolence	*Civic Insouciance* *Civic Irascibility*
Inquiry-related	*Deliberative Conscientiousness* Understanding and working through the stages of inquiry and deliberation; acknowledging that civic matters have to be grounded in epistemically considerate inquiries but cannot be hostage to epistemic goals	*Deliberative Negligence* *Deliberative Paralysis*
Ethical	*Conversational Responsibility* Being aware of the implications of taking a public stance on a subject; offering arguments/reasons in support of one's stance; debating in a way that promotes civic benevolence	*Conversational Carelessness* *Conversational Hypersensitivity*

The proposed account of civil deliberation makes no presumption of exclusivity as a way of cashing out the interplay of civic and epistemic aspects of our deliberation with fellow citizens. Yet this characterization should suffice as a general framework for understanding the deliberative dimension of civility. The next section illustrates why our efforts to unpack the components of civil deliberation are particularly relevant in the context of a discussion about the post-truth condition and the available remedies for its detrimental features.

2. Civic Virtues in the Post-Truth Age: How the Spread of Misinformation Threatens Civil Deliberation

In the opening section, we anticipated that one reason why we should be worried about the developments of the post-truth age is that they obstruct our capacity to cultivate the virtue of civility and, in particular, they impair our capacity for civil deliberation. In this section, we illustrate this problem and its detrimental effects by showing how the post-truth condition threatens each dimension of our deliberation with fellow citizens.

Before doing so, a few remarks are in order. First, a clarification about the notion of a post-truth condition and its link with the environment we are interested in—namely, the digital polis: The post-truth condition is commonly taken to signify a culture that has radically transformed the relationship between human beings and truth in social, political, and scientific domains. In particular, as Fuller (2018) notes, the post-truth condition "democratizes" truth and falsehood in the attempt to transform the public sphere—that is, our social and political lives. Typical problems posed by the post-truth condition involve the proliferation of fake news and alternative facts (which this section focuses on), widespread disregard and disrespect for epistemic authority, and the opportunity for entire communities to manipulate information as they wish.[10] Unsurprisingly, the digital polis constitutes the ideal environment for the post-truth condition to develop. The fact that social networks, blogs, and forums are increasingly taking the place of traditional mass media as platforms for gathering and distributing information means that their users have unprecedented power.[11] In particular, it gives us a chance to make our voices heard and an opportunity to cultivate our convictions and values along with other people who share them.

Second, a couple of methodological points: The spread of fake news and misinformation is widely regarded as a disease for which we urgently need therapy (Lazer et al. 2018). Our work contributes to what have been called *educational therapies* (*Croce and Piazza 2021a*)—that is, approaches aimed at

[10] The term 'post-truth' as well as the notion of the 'post-truth condition' are still widely discussed among philosophers, not to mention scholars of other disciplines. For detailed investigations see, among others, Ferrari and Moruzzi (2020), Ferraris (2017), Fuller (2018), and Maddalena and Gili (2017).

[11] For a comprehensive analysis of how information and communication technologies affect our interaction with the world and the acquisition and distribution of information, see, e.g., Floridi (2014).

counteracting this phenomenon via reforming or improving citizens' online agency.[12] One important limitation of the current philosophical discussions about extant educational therapies is that they appear to restrict their focus to our *epistemic* conduct. Such an approach overlooks at least two decisive factors. First, fake-news consumption is motivated not only by epistemic concerns (namely, the fact that a consumer takes a piece of misinformation to be true) but also by non-epistemic interests, such as the need to reinforce one's social identity within a community and protect one's own community from external pressures or straightforward attacks by rival groups (Croce and Piazza 2021b). Second and relatedly, we deploy social networks not only passively to acquire information about the world but also actively to discuss matters of common interest with other members of our communities.

These methodological remarks illustrate why placing online inquiries and public debate in the context of a reform of our *civic* conduct could provide the appropriate framework for designing educational approaches. For it allows us to explain that the motivational grounds underlying attempts to promote internet literacy, critical thinking, and intellectual virtues should primarily concern not how to make us better thinkers or reasoners per se but rather how we can make the digital polis a more just and equal environment to inhabit.

The scenario we have briefly sketched should make it sufficiently clear why we think that civic traits of character deserve more attention in the discussion of remedies for the post-truth condition. In the remainder of this section, we shall account for the need to cultivate civility—in particular, *civil deliberation*—by investigating how the spread of misinformation threatens the motivational, inquiry-related, and ethical dimensions of our deliberation with fellow citizens. In other words, we aim at showing that the problematic complexity of the communicative dynamics in the digital polis motivates reform of citizens' deliberative conduct.

Let us begin our analysis of the problems posed by the spread of misinformation by investigating why citizens of the digital polis are failing from a *motivational* standpoint. One obvious reason is that the excessive amount of information to which we are exposed interferes with our disposition to actively

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[12] Typical examples of these therapies include strategies to strengthen citizens' internet-literacy skills (Lewandowsky et al. 2012) or cultivate intellectual virtues (Heersmink 2018; Kotsonis 2020; Smart 2018) with the goals of limiting the effect of cognitive biases and helping users assess the epistemic quality of the information they consume.

participate in the community's deliberative processes. To get a feel for the magnitude of this problem, consider that every minute more than 300,000 status updates and almost 60,000 links are shared on Facebook (OmnicoreAgency.com 2019), around 350,000 new posts are tweeted on Twitter (Mention 2018), and 500 hours of new video content are uploaded to YouTube (Statista.com 2019). Clearly, no matter how passionate we are about civic matters and public debate, forming an informed opinion requires that we engage in time-consuming activities and this demotivates us to engage in the community's deliberation processes.

Remaining focused on the motives for our participation in public deliberation is by no means easier, since we only have a limited span of attention. As Gausby (2015) has recently shown, the younger generations have a reduced capacity for sustained attention–more specifically, the capacity to remain focused on the task one is working on till one completes it–for which they compensate with a capacity for multitasking. At first glance, this might sound like reassuring news. On closer inspection, it is far from being so because when we are multitasking today, the average level of selective attention we devote to digital content is 50 percent lower than fifteen years ago. This means that our capacity for multitasking works at the expense of our capacity to discriminate relevant stimuli from irrelevant ones (see also Riva 2018, 117–18). As a consequence, it is highly plausible that our motivation to actively participate in the civic life of our community drowns in the ocean of information to which we are exposed in the digital polis.

As anticipated above, similar considerations apply to the *inquiry-related* dimension of deliberation. Here the problem lies in the activities and the procedures through which we reach an informed opinion on matters of civic interest and, more specifically, in our cognitive limitations. One important reason why we struggle to make epistemically appropriate decisions is that we are prone to cognitive biases and social media are structured in such a way as to amplify the effects of these biases.

An in-depth consideration of these aspects would require a separate project; here we shall concentrate our attention on a selected range of biases and briefly explain their impact on our inquiries on social media. The first cognitive limitations that we shall mention have to do with how we handle cognitive dissonance, namely an experience of conflict between cognitive states alerting us that our desire to know and understand the world around us is not aligned with our evidence. Confirmation bias attempts to reduce cognitive dissonance

by making us prone to looking out for information that confirms or supports our pre-existing beliefs and to disregarding information that clashes with them (Nickerson 1998; Wason 1960). Instead, motivated reasoning reduces cognitive dissonance by obstructing our ability to take into consideration evidence against our beliefs. In particular, this bias leads us to accept evidence supporting our convictions uncritically while readily dismissing evidence that goes against them (Kunda 1990).

Recent research by Dan Kahan (2016) shows that this particular form of reasoning is often prompted by an ideological or political conviction that motivates our biased appraisal of the available evidence. Inevitably, the fact that our political opinions influence how we assess the evidence has a negative effect on the inquiry-related stages of our deliberative processes. This effect is further amplified by the architecture of social media platforms, which take advantage of these cognitive biases to ensure that users spend time on them. Typically, they do so through their algorithms, which filter content in such a way that users are exposed to information that falls in line with their views on political, social, and moral issues (Bozdag 2013; Nichols 2017; Pariser 2013).

Our discussion has so far focused on the effects that these biases have on individual users.[13] It should come as no surprise that the way in which social networks trigger our cognitive limitations can easily pollute the entire information environment of the digital polis because it fosters large-scale phenomena such as group polarization. As Sunstein notes (2002), group polarization is the tendency of a group to display more extreme attitudes and beliefs than the ones its members possess when taken as individual agents. By exposing users to sources and individuals that have similar takes on social, political, and cultural issues, social networks favor the formation of like-minded groups or tribes that lead their members to reinforce their convictions and radicalize their views. Group polarization constitutes a problem for the inquiry-related component of civil deliberation because it nurtures epistemically unjustified belief radicalization. Furthermore, it should be considered as a

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[13] Further cognitive biases that obstruct the inquiry-related dimension of civil deliberation include memory-based mechanisms and fluency effects (Levy 2017). More specifically, memory-based mechanisms impede our efforts to deliberate well by preventing us from recalling whether a piece of content comes from a reliable—as opposed to an unreliable—source (Lewandowsky et al. 2012). Fluency effects encroach on our mnemonic system too but do so via repeated exposure to a given content, which leads us to forget its source (Weaver et al. 2007) or, in its most troublesome version—which psychologists call 'the truth effect' (Fazio et al. 2015)—to take a piece a false information to be true.

fierce enemy of civility and civil deliberation in general, as it fosters a
fragmentation of the society that hinders any attempt to make diverse citizens
collaborate with each other for the common good of the community (Sunstein
2009).[14]

Despite its incompleteness, the scenario we have just sketched should
suffice to show how difficult it is for a citizen of the digital polis to reach an
informed opinion and engage in epistemically considerate deliberations with
fellow citizens on matters of common interest. It is now time to consider some
ethical aspects of the current dynamics of public deliberation that post-truth
communication severely obstructs. In particular, we focus on the problems
affecting our online behavior qua citizens of a digital polis engaged in collective
deliberation, typically via social networks. The overarching ethical problem is
that social media users seem to be unaware of or to underestimate the
consequences of their online conduct. This problem can easily be split into two
issues, one normative and one social.

Regarding the former aspect, the most evident limitation is that we
appear to lack stable norms regulating our online behavior. For example, it is
controversial whether sharing content–including reposting or retweeting–on
social media amounts to endorsing the content (Rini 2017; Lazer et al. 2018).
In the extreme cases, retweeting or liking content shared by other users can
make one liable to defamation lawsuits. (This has recently been the case in such
countries as India, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and South Africa; see
Klaris and Bedat 2018.) We need not enter into the details of this issue here.
Suffice it to say that, on the one hand, it might seem intuitive to treat those who
share content as if they endorsed it (Marsili 2020). On the other hand, we might
still want to ensure that social media users are free to share content just because
they find it interesting, amusing, or curious without necessarily endorsing its
truth.

Though we might be excused for the mistakes we make that stem from
the instability of the norms governing content-sharing on social media, we
surely cannot be excused for engaging in hostile interactions with other users
and in hate speech (O'Regan 2018). Patton et al. (2014) have recently found that
this social problem often originates from the anonymity that comes with online

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[14] Among other factors that contribute to the fragmentation of the society are socio-epistemic
structures like epistemic bubbles and echo chambers, which prevent entire groups of users from
consuming specific kinds of information. For an in-depth discussion of these socio-epistemic
structures, see Nguyen (2020).

activity on social media. Typically, aggressive, disrespectful, or even violent online behavior is fostered by the fact that violent users target socially distant victims—that is, someone with whom a user has no frequent physical contact—and/or hide behind profiles that do not share their real names. Besides constituting enough of an ethical problem in itself, hostile online behavior and hate speech help to polarize and radicalize public debate and are therefore detrimental to both the ethical dimension of collective deliberation and the processes for reaching an informed opinion on issues of public interest.

      In sum, the problems just mentioned demonstrate that we lack the necessary awareness of the responsibility that comes with taking a public stance in a debate in the digital polis, let alone the capacity to discuss and deliberate with fellow citizens in a way that promotes civic friendship.

      It should be clear by now that the communication dynamics of the digital polis threaten all three dimensions of a successful inquiry. They interfere with our motivation to deliberate with fellow citizens, they trigger our cognitive limitations and hamper our procedures for forming informed opinions, and they make us prone to unethical conduct in online environments. However, we should not let this scenario frighten or discourage us too much. Though deliberating well with our fellow citizens is a difficult task for agents living in a post-truth age, our analysis has laid out a framework for understanding the various sides of the challenge and a rationale for the components that a remedial virtue should include. Far from constituting a checkmate against the post-truth condition, being aware of how this condition obstructs the formation of civic character surely constitutes a first and fundamental step toward learning how to deliberate well with our fellow citizens in the online environments we inhabit.

Concluding Remarks

This paper inquired into the civic traits of our character with two general objectives: first, to offer an Aristotelian account of a central civic virtue, namely civility; second, to shed light on the relevance of a discussion on civic virtues in our present times and social settings. We achieved the former objective by showing how Aristotle's insights into civic friendship can be actualized in a novel account of civility that is composed of two main subvirtues, namely civic benevolence and civil deliberation. We then concentrated our analysis on the latter virtue and distinguished three main components—motivational, epistemic, and ethical—as virtuous means between vicious extremes. Regarding the latter

objective, our detailed analysis of civil deliberation allowed us to illustrate how the spread of misinformation typical of our post-truth age impairs our ability to deliberate with fellow citizens on matters of civic interest. In particular, we showed that the communicative dynamics of the online environments we inhabit trigger our proneness to cognitive biases, rely on an infrastructure made to amplify the effects of such limitations, and favor the spread of online misconduct and hate speech because of the anonymity that often comes with online agency.

The scenario we have outlined does not make it easy to imagine how we can cultivate civically virtuous behavior in our communities. That was not our goal. Instead, we hope we have convinced the reader that civic virtues—in particular, civil deliberation—ought to play a more central role in the study of our character, particularly because in the digital polis we need them more than ever. The sooner we realize the urgency of the problem, the faster we'll learn how to contain the detrimental effects of the post-truth condition.

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