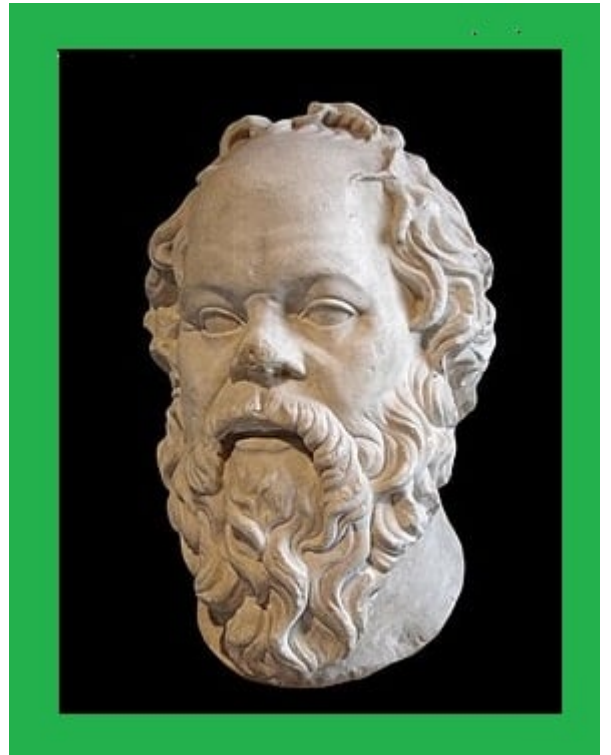


On Dialogue, Disagreement, and the Urgent Need for Humility

By Patrick Keeney

Dialogue is the lifeblood of friendship, which depends upon a certain moral courage: the willingness to be honest, especially about the limits of our knowledge.

I recently shared a quiet lunch with an old friend, an erudite American scholar whose accomplishments in the academy are as impressive as his loyalty to the Democratic Party is steadfast. Our conversation meandered, as good conversations often do, and eventually turned to the topic of tariffs.



With a scholar's curiosity, he asked, "What do you know about tariffs?"

I smiled and replied, "I know nothing. I would gladly match my ignorance of tariffs against any man." He laughed, conceding that despite a career immersed in ideas, the finer points of economics—what Thomas Carlyle once derisively called "the dismal science"—had somehow eluded him as well.

There was something refreshingly honest in the exchange. We were not posturing, nor pretending to possess a competence we lacked. Instead, we were engaging in something quietly radical: the admission of ignorance without shame, the willingness to say “I don’t know” in an age that prizes certainty above all. It was, in essence, a small act of what Socrates, deemed the wisest man in Athens, precisely because he knew that he did not know, would have recognized as epistemic humility.

In an age enamoured with certainty and tribal affirmation, the willingness to admit ignorance has become rare. Yet humility opens the door to learning and the kind of genuine conversation that deepens friendship, advances understanding, and nourishes the fragile bonds of our shared civic life.

Yet, in stark contrast to this spirit, much of our public discourse is marked by a rhetorical style that is its mirror opposite—smug, condescending, confident, and performative.

This tendency crosses ideological lines, to be sure, but it is especially pronounced among certain progressive elites, whose tone exudes moral certainty and often drips with self-righteousness. Here, rhetoric is not a means of persuasion but a vehicle for display—not an effort to engage, but an assertion of superiority. In the most profound sense, it is corrosive to the spirit of democratic exchange.

We are increasingly divided not only by what we believe but also by how we discuss those beliefs. The epistemic divide that characterizes our political culture today is as much emotional as it is intellectual. It is not merely a matter of disagreeing over facts or policies. Instead, it is a question of how beliefs are framed, by whom, and in what tone. This derisive and dismissive tone forecloses conversation, deepens polarization, and makes meaningful dialogue nearly impossible.

A striking example of this attitude came from journalist Ezra

Klein's recent appearance on Real Time with Bill Maher: "If you follow the news, you voted for the Democrats, by and large. If you don't follow the news, you voted for Trump." The implication is unmistakable. Following the news is presented as shorthand for critical thinking, rationality, and, by extension, moral superiority. Following the news becomes a kind of epistemic baptism in this framing, cleansing its adherents of the ignorance and prejudice allegedly endemic to the other side.

This tone of smug superiority is not merely alienating but profoundly counterproductive. I recognize it all too well from the university, where a kind of performative intellectualism often cloaks its condescension in credentials and polished prose. This posturing, far from advancing genuine inquiry, undermines the institution's commitment to truth by prioritizing status and rhetorical flourish over substantive engagement with ideas.

It fosters a class of "knowers" more concerned with signalling their status and presumed expertise than with cultivating genuine understanding. And when these rhetorical habits seep from the seminar room into the broader culture, they do not elevate public discourse but impoverish it, corroding the very conditions that make democratic dialogue possible.

I was recently struck by this passage from psychiatrist and philosopher Iain McGilchrist, which captures this phenomenon: "There is a belief that anyone who seems to be thoughtful must (surely?) adhere to a set of beliefs that I call the 'current narrative'. ... Objectively, that is very odd. The general assumption during my lifetime has been that people's political views might vary very widely, without any adverse imputations on either side."

This, I believe, cuts to the heart of the matter. That political views have always varied widely is a simple truth of pluralistic, democratic societies. But today, our discourse

has become saturated with contempt and derision for those we disagree with; even the most carefully reasoned argument, however well supported by evidence, will fail to persuade. This pervasive hostility stifles genuine dialogue, entrenching divisions and undermining the shared commitment to reason essential for a flourishing democratic culture.

Of course, this is not to exonerate the right, Trumpism, or the Republican Party—each facing its own challenges, from conspiracy thinking to anti-institutional cynicism. However, acknowledging those problems should not exempt the left from its rhetorical excesses. Indeed, the health of the democratic order depends on self-scrutiny across the spectrum.

This malaise—what we might call an outbreak of epistemic sclerosis—is, at its core, a cultural affliction. We are losing the art of good-faith disagreement, and with it, the epistemic humility upon which any functioning democracy depends. Too many public figures now speak as though a host of heavenly angels were permanently arrayed on their side, casting dissenters not merely as mistaken, but as morally deficient and intellectually suspect. Such assumptions do not invite inquiry; they extinguish it. They short-circuit curiosity and replace it with a withering contempt that corrodes the possibility of dialogue.

We do not need a retreat from firm conviction but a renewal of respectful engagement. We need to restore modesty to our political conversations. We need to establish a political rhetoric that is passionate without being punitive, principled yet free of pride. Democracy is sustained not only by rights but also by responsibilities. Foremost among these is the duty to listen to one another with respect, patience, and a willingness to change our minds in light of better arguments and evidence.

Above all, we must recover a forgotten civic virtue: the humility to acknowledge that none of us sees the whole

picture, and that all of us are fallible. As Pascal famously observed, “We do not possess the truth or the good completely, but only in part and mixed with falsehood and evil.”

This kind of epistemic humility is not weakness but—as has been recognized since the time of Socrates—a form of wisdom. It allows us to live together in difference without resorting to violence, retreating into algorithmic echo chambers, or forsaking the public square in despair.

An earlier version of this essay was published at the [Epoch Times](#)