



Sharyn Clough

“The Principle of Charity and the Practice of Peace:
Metaphysics oder Pragmatism?”

In: Yvonne Huetter–Almerigi and Robert Sinclair (Eds.) (2026).
Pragmatism, Metaphysics and Method—Essays for Bjørn Ramberg
(pp. 301–324). Nordic Studies in Pragmatism 5. Helsinki: Nordic
Pragmatism Network.

ISSN-L 1799-3954

ISSN 1799-3954

ISBN 978-952-67497-4-7

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Nordic Pragmatism Network,
Helsinki 2026

www.nordprag.org

The Principle of Charity and the Practice of Peace: Metaphysics oder Pragmatism?

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1. Introduction

I started outlining this essay in early 2024 from my office in a college town situated on the traditional territory of the Ampinefu, in the Pacific Northwest of the us just south of bc, the Canadian province in which I was born. The American presidential election loomed large. I was going to write that it loomed large “in the background,” but I stopped, because it was of course never in the background. I have lived in the us through a number of consequential presidential campaigns, but the presidential campaigns of 2024 portended something else altogether.

Midway through the year I jotted down on a sticky note “half the country is crazy”—a phrase that now guides the rhetorical structure of this essay. A cautionary note here: The term “crazy” is used to mean variously, “unusual,” “false,” “unintelligible,” “irrational,” and even “violent,” but also of course, “mentally ill.” Insofar as people with mental illnesses often struggle to have their own testimony taken seriously, the conflation of all these meanings makes their struggles even more challenging, and the use of the term should be discouraged on these grounds. In this essay I report on the ubiquitous use of the term, struggle with my own use of it, and discuss how, guided by a pragmatist reading of Donald Davidson, the conflation of all these referents is self-defeating. It would not surprise me if the ableism and the self-defeating nature of the term were related but I do not explore this possibility here.

I kept hearing or reading the phrase everywhere—on my social media feed, on the news, in faculty meetings. At low points I even caught myself muttering it, or in the interest of full disclosure, shouting it to the sky. That is until I listened more carefully to who was joining the chorus of shouting and realized it was *everyone*. So, by my keen powers of deduction, it became clear that I was part of someone else's "half" as *they* shouted, "half the country is crazy." Gathering all the empathy I could, I wondered if perhaps this someone else might be taking the same kind of epistemic care as I was to puzzle through what could plausibly be meant by the phrase "half the country is crazy" if everyone thought the referent of "half the country" was some other half that excluded them.

Who am I kidding. Relatively few have an educational pathway, job description, and reinforcement schedule that encourages the particular kind of epistemic care with which I have puzzled over the phrase. This isn't to boast. It is meant instead as a recognition of the contingency, with no small amount of irony and, ultimately, solidarity, that conspired to bring me as a new PhD student in the fall of 1991 to the door of Bjørn Torgrim Ramberg's office in the philosophy department on the 7th floor of the library at Simon Fraser University to ask him about Donald Davidson. There are of course other routes to epistemic care, but truly this felt—this still feels—pretty unusual, in academia especially, for the model of charity and peace that Bjørn provided as a mentor on the journey.

So back to the essay—in honour of Bjørn—where I deploy his pragmatist reading of Davidson as a modest contribution to the project of clearing through the ethical/political/philosophical sludge in which many of us living in the United States have been mired over the last few election cycles. I have fruitful conversations with Bjørn in my head, often, especially in the writing of this essay. But the sludge is deep and the challenges profound. I have started writing the essay many times over the last year, setting it aside when I was too frustrated or sad to marshal the discipline needed to say what I hoped it would be helpful to hear someone say, if not shout to the sky—anything to block the cries of "half the country is crazy." But now the election has come and gone. There is nothing to be done in this instance but write or cry, or both. It seems important to acknowledge that as a white person and a university professor, I am (as of this writing) more or less shielded from many of the privations that others have been suffering as a result of the election outcome. In this sense, writing about it is a privilege, but also a responsibility.

The arguments I offer at this point in the collective psychodrama can be no more than gestures—partial, incomplete, not enough. But perhaps they will spark curiosity in some other new PhD student who stumbles across them, wondering how best to make philosophy matter. That’s what I had first come to Bjørn to figure out—how to make philosophy matter, in my case to feminism, to scientists, and heaven help them, to feminist scientists. Rorty, as a pragmatist philosopher, seemed to me to matter in all the relevant ways, but his use of Davidson seemed a complicated part of the equation about which I required some guidance. What a stroke of luck that the philosophers at Simon Fraser University had just hired someone who knew something about how Davidson might matter to pragmatism, to science, to cultural politics such as feminism. Testing if and how a particular philosophical tool might matter to feminist scientists continues to be one of the methods I use in judging the usefulness of academic philosophy, but I now try to test that usefulness against the needs of an even broader public, indeed, in my case, the American public, if such a thing can still be identified.

Whether anything can be made of the concept of an American public in the current political moment is a question that, I argue, can be answered in the affirmative, more or less, though it will take a lot of work, both in terms of laying out the argument itself, and in terms of the community building that the argument prescribes. The basic plot of the essay will be first, to air some concerns about the limits of communicative and interpretative practices during times of intense political polarization; second, to show how Bjørn’s pragmatist reading of Davidson addresses these limits, clearing a path forward; and third and finally, to offer some ideas about what walking that path might look like for a pragmatist, that is, which habits we need to inculcate and which we might need to abandon as we continue with the ongoing community building required for achieving our country.

2. On the limits of communicative and interpretative practices in the current political moment

I’m going to assume if you’ve read this far, then like me, you’ve encountered in the last decade, and with increasing frequency in the last few years, claims about the failures of rationality on display by half the country. I want for the moment to model neutrality with respect to which half (and

even which country, as these concerns become increasingly global) because neither national identity nor political party affiliation seems to make much difference to the general content of the claims—there are important symmetries at work. Of course there are differences as well, depending on the granularity of the analysis, but these differences get all the attention, pretty much everywhere, and I want to focus on the similarities, something that is easier to do if national and political affiliations are, temporarily at least, deemphasized. For most of this essay then I will refer to “people who voted differently,” and “supporters of the other political leader,” rather than, in the us, for example, “supporters of Donald Trump” or “supporters of Kamala Harris.” I want at strategic points in this essay to keep the focus on the similarities between the claims made by “us” and “them” rather than be distracted by the identities of those making the claims. This will also allow me to write as if the “us” includes you dear reader. Even if you and I ultimately differ in national identity or political party affiliation, I invite you to see how far you can come along for the ride. If I do this right, it will be pretty far.

So consider the general content of the claims at issue and focus on the ease with which they could be uttered by almost anyone: “I just don’t understand how people could support political leader x; people who voted for political leader x are unhinged, irrational, uninformed, haters of democracy who want to use the government to take away our freedoms.” In addition to the claims of irrationality on the part of people who voted differently from us, their beliefs are also characterized as impossible to understand, but nonetheless mistaken, often ideologically concealed, and finally, immoral. Perhaps you can already guess how these elements taken together might become an appropriate target for the kind of conceptual untangling that Bjørn’s work on Davidson offers us but indulge me a little longer.

To reward your indulgence, I will admit that the targets of my concern in the us context are primarily supporters of Trump. And I think I have quite a bit of evidence supporting the view that I am on the right side of this historical moment and that the folks who voted differently from me are on the wrong side. So even as I prescribe the solidarity work needed to widen the community of people to whom we are responsible, of who counts as “us,” there will be no championing of relativism to get there. Major differences must be resolved. Supporters of competing political candidates cannot each be right about the main issues that divide us. For example, I think that the people who voted differently from me

have supported a political leader who will only exacerbate the systemic harms faced by the most marginalized.

But here's the rub. If you've been watching events unfold you will have seen by now that partisans *across the political spectrum*, accuse their rivals of exacerbating systemic harms faced by the most marginalized. When leveled at me or the candidates I support, these accusations can leave me completely frustrated and even enraged. In calmer moments, however, I am able to observe that pretty much everyone likes to think of themselves as being on the side of justice in terms of protection for the most marginalized, but there is limited consensus around who is the most marginalized and therefore deserving of that justice, and what role the government should play in managing these decisions.

There is of course the possibility that when the people who voted differently from me are voicing their desire to seek justice and protection for the most marginalized, their desire is actually being *manipulated* by their political leaders, but let's focus instead on the fact that this desire is *there to be manipulated*, in them as in anyone, including me and you.

So, forget if you can the details of which political party causes me the most concern and read on as if it doesn't matter. At least part of my prescriptive project here will be to offer a reminder that working in solidarity together to widen the community will mean that differences in political affiliation take on less significance (and this starts a feedback loop—when political affiliation takes on less significance, then it is easier to widen the community.)

Here, then, is the generic conditional, neutral with respect to political and even national affiliation, that lays out the stumbling blocks to solidarity work, to community building. The conditional has a complicated antecedent: If we are right and people who voted differently from us are wrong; but they think they are right and *we* are wrong; and the stakes are high because the marginalized need protection; and we are unlikely to find violent struggle helpful; *then* we have somehow to *communicate* with the people who voted differently from us, to convince them of the errors of their ways, or at least the benefits of *our* ways, without the use of physical force.

I should note here that if you found yourself grumbling about the speed with which I dismissed the notion that violent struggle will be helpful for us, I feel your pain. But I have been following the work of Iraq-war veteran and peace educator Paul K. Chappell long enough now to know that when we entertain notions of violence, we are usually driven

by a completely unrealistic picture of what is actually involved (e.g. Chappell 2017). We have “romantic illusions of violence” (Chappell 2017, 194). However, even if some members of this imagined “we” were seasoned soldiers, the main reason for dismissing violent struggle as an option in this case is because the actual enemies here cannot be vanquished with violence. As King noted, “violence can murder the liar, but it cannot kill the lie nor establish to truth” (2010 [1967], 64) To kill lies and establish truths, we need at the very least *to communicate* with each other, which requires that we all be alive, and mostly, well.

But how would that go exactly? How on earth are we going to communicate with each other when the polarized climate makes this particular task seem singularly impossible? Here, I argue, Bjørn’s pragmatist readings of Davidson’s philosophy of language might matter.

3. How Bjørn’s work on Davidson addresses the limits of our communicative and interpretative practices, and charts a path forward

In the mid-2000s, Bjørn wrote a couple of essays for edited collections that addressed the theme of metaphysics and its relation to pragmatism, titled “Rorty, Davidson, and the Future of Metaphysics in America” (2008) and “Method and Metaphysics: Pragmatist Doubts” (2011). More on Bjørn’s definition of metaphysics and pragmatism below, but for now I note only that I take him to have defined them in just the right way. I read these two essays when they came out, initially unsure of how they might make philosophy matter. I thought metaphysics was finished and wasn’t sure it needed further dismantling. Clearly, I was spending too much time, or just the right amount of time, with feminist philosophers of science typically less concerned with the metaphysical and more focused on the pragmatic. At any rate, the problem Bjørn was tackling was that it is very easy to read Davidson as a metaphysician, and if Scott Soames had anything to say about it, a failed metaphysician (Soames, 2003), but, says Bjørn, we can do way more interesting things with Davidson’s theories if we read him instead as a pragmatist. So, let’s do that.

Done. (Bjørn had me at “metaphilosophical divergences”).

I tucked these essays away and didn’t think much about them, their obvious rightness needing no further nurturing. However, in early 2024,

as utterances of “half the country is crazy” began to coalesce into a ubiquitous anthem, and the difficulties of communicating between us and them became more and more obvious, those two essays began tugging at me. If you know these essays, you might be able to predict where I’m going.

I’ll begin with a pattern I have encountered in commentary on my social media feed whereby our difficulty in communicating with people in other political camps is explained by appeal to distinct conceptual schemes separating us and them. Of course, the language of conceptual schemes isn’t always or even often used, but the claim that half the country is unintelligible to the other half seems to infer it. While I have long been convinced of Davidson’s arguments against the very idea of a conceptual scheme, the inference gave me pause. Just how strong were Davidson’s arguments here? What grounded them?

The pragmatist in me could make no sense of a *metaphysical* grounding, though in moments of weakness it certainly did feel comforting to entertain the *necessity* of Davidson’s arguments. If Davidson’s arguments against the possibility of conceptual schemes were revealing of some necessary feature of language, then the difficulties in communicating with people in other political camps comes down to collective failures of will or skill. Surely then, if we and they worked hard enough to get past our differences, there could be *some* hope for reconciliation through communication. If there were no *metaphysical* barriers, how hard could it be?

In “Method and Metaphysics: Pragmatist Doubts,” Bjørn does not allow this small comfort if it is purchased at the expense of reading Davidson’s anti-conceptual scheme arguments in metaphysical terms. If debates about the existence of conceptual schemes are played out in the metaphysical arena, then there are two paths to take, and Bjørn has pragmatist doubts about both of them.

The first path is to invoke a conceptual scheme when claiming that it is metaphysically impossible for us to understand what it is like to be a bat, say, or the supporter of a rival political leader, or an alien. All we can do when confronted with a differing conceptual scheme of this metaphysical sort is take our ball and our bat (the other kind of bat) and go home. The second path is to argue that conceptual schemes are a metaphysical impossibility in the face of a number of features of language learning and communication that hold necessarily by virtue of their being features of language learning and communication. Some people (Soames for instance) read Davidson as taking this second path. Soames then argues that contra Davidson, we have “no reason to believe that there *couldn’t*

be speakers whose conceptual schemes were so different from ours that we couldn't translate their speech" (Soames, 2004, 330, quoted in Ramberg, 2011 132, emphasis added). Davidson then looks to be mistaken when confronted with the empirical facts of very real and perhaps insurmountable communicative differences between people supporting different political leaders, say.

In "Method and Metaphysics," Bjørn concedes that Davidson's arguments against conceptual schemes can indeed be read as grounded in the metaphysical, but he notes that "nothing Davidson says limits the extent to which the potential for communicative success remains an empirical question" (138). When "Method and Metaphysics" was published, Bjørn must have imagined, reasonably enough, a reading audience for whom the probability of encountering someone operating with an unintelligible conceptual scheme seemed low, so he made use of a thought experiment. He wrote: "It seems easy enough to imagine communicating organisms or systems whose makeup (say, life span) is so different from ours that communication between them and us would be impossible—perhaps we could flesh out a thought experiment such that As and Bs, happily chatting in their separate camps, would be unable even to recognize each other as communicating creatures. Would this show that Davidson is wrong?" (138). Bjørn does not think so.

He continues in a passage I quote here at length as I will return later to a number of its elements:

Soames may well be right that on some occasions we might want to attribute different conceptual schemes to people or to cultures. What we would mean by that, however, is that their habits of acting, thinking, and speaking are different—rooted, perhaps, in vast differences in their natural or cultural environment—and that those habits are so rigid that there seems to be no way to work past them toward mutual understanding. But it wouldn't then be as if we had discovered that there are conceptual schemes after all. In such cases, we are not relying on the idea of conceptual schemes to explain anything; we are simply applying that term as shorthand for obstacles and differences that may well be quite pervasive and systematic, but whose roots and explanations are to be found in practice, in behavior, in the environment, and in interests. Indeed, it is the explanatory uselessness of the idea of a conceptual

scheme that is the immediate pragmatist lesson of Davidson's attack on the idea. Ramberg 2011, 138–39

Now of course, one might decide to continue using the term “conceptual scheme” knowing that it is a shorthand for all the important pragmatic details that are doing the causal work, but then the worry is that the term can take on a life of its own, as it seems to have done in some corners of contemporary analytic philosophy, disguising its genealogy. One ought to handle such terms with caution.

Here is where I think Bjørn's incisive analysis leaves us. Divergent worldviews might indeed in some instances cause massive and perhaps insurmountable difficulties in communication—but this is not a metaphysical claim about what is possible or impossible. The empirical details matter. Unfortunately, in the US for example, beginning however far back we want to go, but definitely increasing with the most recent presidential campaigns, the empirical details are pointing to massive and perhaps insurmountable difficulties in communication between people, us and them, who supported different political parties.

It might seem like we are right back where we started. So what if Davidson's arguments against conceptual schemes are best viewed as empirical rather than metaphysical? How does it help to remove a metaphysical barrier to communication between us and them, but leave open the empirical possibility of massive and perhaps insurmountable difficulties in communication? Earlier I had mentioned somewhat facetiously that if the barriers to communication between us and them were empirical rather than metaphysical, then it couldn't be *that* hard to figure out a solution. But it turns out, it's still pretty hard. We are in the midst not of the empirical *possibility* of massive barriers to communication, but of the empirical *actuality* of such barriers, and it looks and feels bleak. However, the pragmatic clearing of metaphysical barriers does end up paying a number of dividends; and we probably wouldn't be honouring Bjørn if he wasn't so skilled at bringing those dividends to the fore. So, let's return now to Bjørn's earlier essay “Rorty, Davidson, and the Future of Metaphysics in America” (2008), where he argues that there are other ways that metaphysics might be muddying the communicative terrain and uses his pragmatist approach to offer a prescription and clear a path.

In this essay Bjørn provides more details about what he means by “metaphysics” and “pragmatism.” He describes metaphysics as “an inquiry into the non-empirical presuppositions of knowing and doing” (441)

and contrasts it with the strains of secularization offered by Rorty's pragmatism, namely "the development of a human self-understanding that eschews the need for legitimation of human thought and sentiment by appeal to structures—modes of being—that transcend transitory, finite, situated human existence" (441). This is the kind of human self-understanding that Bjørn thinks we should get behind, and who among us could say no? In earlier work (Clough, 2021) I have joined the chorus, noting that Rorty's criticisms of philosophical appeals to foundations outside or beyond human experience should not be read as questioning the usefulness of a particular extant foundation, but were instead reminding us that "every time we thought we were appealing to such a foundation [...] we have over and over again discovered that we were fooling ourselves" (Clough, 2021, 8). All we have ever done is appeal to foundations built by us. Following Bjørn, I have argued that these boot-strapped foundations provide us all the support we need for our evidential claims and in fact require us to be even more responsible in our evidence gathering than if those foundations were imposed by forces outside us (Clough, 2021).

So, as a start, in our attempts at communication with people who voted differently from us, we ought to get over ourselves, adopt some epistemic humility, and avoid sounding like we have access to authoritative structures that transcend situated human existence. This is a negative prescription but it's not nothing. Bjørn continues:

Metaphysics is a strategy for insulating the work of philosophy from the larger issues of cultural politics which are the locus of human action, choice and suffering. The real point of the critique of metaphysics is that we risk diminishing our own powers—both our power to see new opportunities for engaging with the world, and our power to act on suffering in ameliorating fashion. Fighting against metaphysics is to contribute to our ability and willingness to take responsibility for how we talk.

Ramberg, 2008, 441

A key point here is that while we may not be able to control how other people talk, we can certainly take more care with how *we* talk, and this care will play no small part in generating the kind of communicative landscape needed for the solidarity work, together, across differences, to widen the community.

So, how careful *are* we when we talk? What do you hear when *we* shout "half the country is crazy"? I hear a number of things, but what

leaps out is an implied but metaphysically-loaded rejection of a shared world, a shared language, and shared experiences. In some cases, this rejection might be motivated by self-protection, an instinct I understand. Attempts at communication across this chasm might not be safe for everyone. But too often, I fear, the rejection of a shared world, a shared language, and shared experiences, functions as insulation from the very ground on which the work of communication needs to begin. And by being insulated in this way, we relinquish our ability to distinguish true from false, to act in ways that are helpful rather than harmful, just rather than unjust. If Davidson is right about the (idealized if not metaphysical) model of communicative triangulation, and I agree with Bjørn that he is (most recently Clough, 2020a) then we can't argue that the people who voted differently from us hold beliefs that are false, unhelpful, and unjust, while also regarding them as unintelligible (see also Clough, 2020b). So, which is it? Are their beliefs false, unhelpful, unjust? Or are they unintelligible? Reading Davidson's arguments against conceptual schemes through a pragmatist rather than a metaphysical lens, reminds us of the power that comes when we trade in the former set of characterizations—that is, the power we have “to act on suffering in ameliorating fashion” that comes with distinguishing between the true and false, the helpful and unhelpful, the just and unjust—but this is exactly the power we give up if we choose instead the latter, characterizing people who voted differently from us as unintelligible.

Back to the passage from Bjørn's 2011 essay, quoted at length, above, it becomes ever clearer that appealing to metaphysical claims about the differences between us and them, not only diminishes our powers to alleviate suffering, it does no explanatory work. When we resort to conceptual scheme language and its cognates, this is merely a “shorthand for obstacles and differences that may well be quite pervasive and systematic [as they indeed seem to be in the current political climate], but *whose roots and explanations are to be found in practice, in behavior. . .*” So, here's another pragmatist prescription we can identify in Bjørn's metaphysical doubts: To fully clear the path of communicative challenges so that we can work in solidarity to widen our community, we need to dig down to the roots of our practices and behaviors.

4. Walking the communicative path as a pragmatist

So what are the practices and behaviors of concern? Let's start with the recent presidential election in the us and get clear about how many people

actually *voted* for the other political leader. It was this particular behavior, more than the results of the electoral college and thus the election itself, that left many either excited, angry, perplexed, or some combination. Perhaps surprisingly, given what was at stake, only 63.76 % of the “voter eligible population” actually voted. According to Election Lab at the University of Florida, this figure is historically high but not quite as high as it was in the 2020 federal election (McDonald, 2024).

As of Nov. 22, a PolitiFact report noted that of those who voted, Trump won the popular vote over Harris by just 1.62 percent. That’s a smaller difference between candidates than any election since Bush won in 2000 by 0.51 percent. “Going back further, only John F. Kennedy in 1960 and Nixon in 1968 won the popular vote by smaller margins, 0.17 percent and 0.7 percent, respectively” (Jacobsen, 2024). The report continues: “In both percentage and raw votes, Trump’s margin is on pace to be less than half of what Biden achieved four years earlier.”

Finally, according to *The New York Times* (2024) as of December 1, of the 154 million votes counted so far (estimated >99% counted) the popular vote looked like this: Harris received 74 441 588 votes (or 48.33% of the eligible voters); and Trump received 76 917 128 votes (or 49.94% of those voters). For those still concerned about conceptual scheme relativism, it might be reassuring to hear that as of Dec. 1, the more conservative outlet, *Fox News* (2024) reported identical numbers (updated feeds on both sites were still reporting very similar numbers as of Dec. 30. 2024).

So in the us context, at least, it is clear that the election results tell us *nothing* about *half* the country, at best we learn that approximately half of the two thirds of those eligible to vote chose a different candidate than we did. This is important. But still, it does reveal that well over 70 million people are wrong in some important ways, while at the same time, those 70 million are convinced that the other 70 million are the ones who are wrong in some important ways. Once again, with feeling: “So now what?”

To work in solidarity, to widen our community, requires the difficult task of communication across differences in ways that successfully identify errors in the thinking of those with whom we disagree, and strategically recommend our own ways of thinking instead. To do this well, there are probably a number of new communicative habits we need to develop, and quite a few old habits we need to abandon. In this final section, I identify some from both categories, highlighting a pragmatist throughline very much inspired by Bjørn’s work on Davidson.

Much of what I review here is presented in more detail in “Charity, Peace, and the Social Epistemology of Science Controversies” (Clough, 2020b), as well as in “Rorty as Liberal Ironist Peace Warrior” (2020a). I also find inspiration in Elizabeth Anderson’s 2022 essay “Can We Talk: Communicating Moral Concern In An Era Of Polarized Politics,” and I was particularly gratified that she cites the work of Chappell who I mentioned earlier, in particular his book *The Art of Waging Peace: A Strategic Approach to Improving Our Lives and the World* (2013). Chappell’s conception of Peace Literacy, of peace *as* a literacy, a set of skills, a *phronesis*, has informed my public philosophy work over the last few years (e.g., Matheis and Clough, 2021), especially that related to political polarization generally, and as it affects the uptake of science-informed policy, in particular.

Here then are some suggestions for moving forward—they are all really obvious, but also difficult to practice, so we need to do just that, *practice* them, and we should allow ourselves some grace when we fail. That is one of the virtues of thinking of peace as a literacy or skillset rather than as a moral category. Because most of us believe we are good people, we’ll expect that peace should come easily to us, and we might find ourselves getting defensive or feeling shame when it doesn’t. Just as children need training and practice in reading and writing, so too with peace skills. We shouldn’t expect people to be any good at any of this, even good people, without a lot of training and practice.

4.1 Adopting epistemic humility

With respect to our commitment to the values we hold dear, we should try to adopt epistemic humility and avoid its opposite, epistemic hubris. Insofar as metaphysical themes are those that scratch an itch for certainty, “for legitimization in terms of something beyond human interest,” we should keep in mind that our appeals to the authority of our values are thoroughly human, contingent and defeasible. This point mirrors Rorty’s commitment to irony that Bjørn has done much to recommend. In his essay “Irony’s commitment” (2014) Bjørn asks the question you might also be asking at this point: “How can it be that we strengthen [our] values by insisting on their contingency?” (Ramberg, 2014, 144). Bjørn proceeds to allay the relativistic fears underlying the question, but I want also to interject some pragmatic elements of *strategy* here.

It’s embarrassing that I have to remind myself of this, but whenever I am trying seriously to engage with someone intent on changing my mind

but whose views seem completely out of touch with what I know to be real and true, there is no more effective strategy they might deploy to keep me from listening to them than when they make clear the impossibility that they might be wrong. So presumably, this works both ways. I have had occasion to quote Josiah Royce in this regard:

Take whatever thou knowest of desire and of striving, of burning love and of fierce hatred, realize as fully as thou can what that means, and then with clear certainty add: such as that is for me, so is it for [them], nothing less. Royce, 1895, 158

And as I work with irony and epistemic humility to widen the community of people to whom I am responsible—to change hearts and minds—I must also be prepared to be changed. As Christian Matheis puts it “In laboring to endure one another, we make one another. To state it another way, humane co-affective relation refers to the way that another person plays a role in laboriously making me, and that I play in making another person” (Matheis, 2014, 12).

Modeling an acceptance of the contingency of my views, does not mean that I have to be prepared to give up my basic commitments to justice, say, but my evidence for these commitments is complicated and very much a product of the particular books I have read, the scholars, including Bjørn, with whom I have had the good fortune to work—accidents of influence, history, carefully curated social media feeds, and a variety of other contingent features that not everyone could possibly share, including or especially my interlocutors, on those rare occasions when we are in a room together long enough to have the kind of conversations that would reveal these differences. My interlocutors live in echo chambers whose outlines are obvious to me, but I have far less access to the architectural renderings of my own epistemic shelters. This asymmetric accessibility reminds me of the importance of extending to others what Robin Dembroff calls “ideological mercy” (Dembroff and Sosis, 2019). While I have good reason to think those who voted differently than me hold a number of positions that are mistaken or misguided, it behooves me to examine explanations for their mistakes or misguidance that appeal to the very different epistemic paths they have taken to get there, rather than jumping to the conclusion that we have consumed and evaluated identical evidence sets and they have simply rejected that evidence due to ideological fealty to the forces of evil.

The practice of both humility and hubris are contagious. If we find ourselves in a school board meeting with parents who signal by various means that they voted for a different presidential candidate than we did, we have an opportunity to choose which—humility or hubris—we will practice, hoping thereby to encourage its adoption by others. (At other times, when we haven't slept well, or had enough to eat, we are more likely to go with our ingrained habits and, as philosophers, those ingrained habits are more inclined to hubris than humility, in which case, the best we can do is recognize it, offer ourselves some grace, and try again next time).

An attitude of humility can of course be faked. I do think though that there is something to the habitual act of admitting you might be wrong that can end up producing genuine humility over time even if the initial act was insincere, a point made by Beaulac and Kenyon in their essay "The Scope of Debiasing in the Classroom" (2018). I highly recommend this essay for a helpful discussion about what some of the suggestions I offer here would look like in practice, including "The Concession Exercise," which is a "fake it until you make it" assignment to help the development of humility.

4.2 Locating common ground

I have already mentioned the need to acknowledge the common ground that we share with our interlocutors, but it bears repeating. It draws on the principal of charity, part of which involves the Davidsonian reminder that mutual intelligibility requires we hold a number of true beliefs in common, against which false beliefs can be identified as false. I have at times in this essay modeled rhetorical neutrality with respect to which political leader's supporters I think are wrong, in order to emphasize that the communicative and interpretive problems under discussion arise from a great deal of common ground between people no matter which political leader they voted for (to review an incomplete list: supporters of rival political leaders have expressed concern that their opponents are a danger to democracy; that they want to use the government to take away important freedoms, and that they are trampling on the rights of marginalized people). What we need to do now, is communicate with each other that we share these concerns.

This is not to minimize the very real differences in how the concepts of "democracy," "freedom," and "marginalized," are deployed by people

who voted for different presidential candidates, but rather to offer a starting point. And increasingly, that starting point is looking more and more like the practice of radical interpretation—the Davidsonian thought-experiment that imagines us finding ourselves in a strange land, perhaps a red state (or a blue state!), where we don't recognize the native language. But we can triangulate between the shared bits of the world to which the native speakers are referring and the sounds that they make and take it from there. It is laborious and painstaking, but what else is there to do? Discovering, and taking seriously, that people who voted differently from me have a deep commitment to something they call "freedom," (however different it is from my conception) invites a conversation about what features of freedom are important to each of us, or at least it does not foreclose these conversations, which is a start. And there is abundant sociological research about the efficacy of strategies for shifting attitudes that otherwise put "freedom" in conflict with concepts such as "equality" (see Clough and Loges, 2008, 88–91). These strategies were taken up by the Civil Rights movement in the US, and they had some success. That fact that much of that success has been eroded is a good reminder that democracy is less like running a race and more like tending a garden. The work is never finished. And we have good models for how to continue.

Onward!

Let's imagine that you did not vote for Trump and you are in a position of needing to make common cause, and therefore to establish some common ground, with people who did. As an example, in "Charity, Peace, and the Social Epistemology of Science Controversies" (2020b) I tried to model what it would be like to find common ground with parents who are hesitant to vaccinate their children. Some vaccine-hesitant parents support Trump, some of them are my students and my neighbors, some of them volunteer with me at our local high school.

Finding common ground on this issue was a difficult and sobering task, and not the least because it meant communicating with people who voted differently than me in the last presidential election. It was also sometimes difficult to communicate my findings to people with whom I share roughly the same political affiliations. Policies around mandatory vaccinations for children hit close to home across the political spectrum. Ultimately, I was encouraged by Maya Goldenberg's work (2016; 2019) to abandon the common view that vaccine hesitant parents are necessarily "anti-science," and uninterested in evidence or truth. It turns out that

many of these parents share basic beliefs that are true, they care about their children (!) and according to Goldenberg they want the best medical science they can find that will tell them whether a particular vaccine will hurt their particular child. For a variety of good reasons, hearing from medical professionals about statistical patterns that made the harms to their own child *unlikely*, was unsatisfying for these parents. They were also sometimes concerned about the effects of financial incentives on the objectivity of research that had been sponsored by pharmaceutical companies (imagine!).

As an exercise in humility, I reflected on my own confidence in the efficacy of vaccines. It is a *little* informed by some literacy in the relevant biomedicine but mostly, as Naomi Scheman reminds us, it is based on a great deal of trust (Scheman, 2001). As someone white, middle-class, and well-educated, I have lots of reasons to trust the science behind vaccines, or at least very few reasons *not* to trust the science. In fact, I have received the MMR vaccine at least twice in my lifetime and probably three times. True story. Also true, the reason for the last of these vaccines was not due to careful deliberation on my part about the evidence of the MMR vaccine's efficacy, but because of my trust in vaccines generally and my failure to remember the previous vaccine I had received, and my doctor's failure to look up my records, because of his *complete trust* in my memory! If I was Black or indigenous, and/or I had lived in a community affected by the opioid crisis, I might not have reason to trust medical, governmental, or pharmaceutical institutions and my response to mandatory vaccine policy might be very different.

Returning to vaccine hesitant parents, to be sure, some of their fears are not well-supported by evidence and can be exaggerated and ramped up on social media. Distinguishing between fact and Russian-bot- inspired conspiracy is getting increasingly difficult and will only get more so, *for all of us*. As Naomi Oreskes reminds us, we all can and have been manipulated by the well-funded manufacturers of doubt on any number of science policy fronts (Oreskes and Conway, 2010). But I want to be clear that our desire for good evidence, for truth, is something we have in common. This desire is not what is being manufactured, it is what is being manipulated. In "Charity, Peace, and the Social Epistemology of Science Controversies," I concluded my discussion about vaccine hesitant parents by noting that "where we disagree is not over the importance of having true beliefs, or the importance of evidence, it's over which beliefs are true, and who to trust as an authority in those cases (most of them) when the evi-

dence is too complex to be evaluated by non-experts” (Clough, 2020b, 138). As the late Helen De Cruz would no doubt remind us, more of our beliefs than we’d probably like to admit function as connection points with our communities and less as straightforward descriptive claims for which we have gathered direct and explicit evidence (see her wonderful essay “Believing to Belong: Addressing the Novice-Expert Problem in Polarized Scientific Communication” 2020). Her point explains the heavy social freight that weighs on us when we are asked to consider the merits of beliefs that are opposed to ours, adding to the difficulties many of us experience in talking across those differences. This is just an overview of some of the arguments that allow me to rest assured that we and those with whom we have deep disagreements are not separated by metaphysically impossible chasms, with evidence seeking on our side, and full-throated irrationality on their side. Still, it might be that as Bjørn put it, “their habits of acting, thinking, and speaking are [so] different [...] and [...] so rigid that there seems to be no way to work past them toward mutual understanding” (2011, 138). At some point, our habits and theirs might be too entrenched to change, regardless of how much care we take to try and communicate across our common ground.

This is a demoralizing reminder of just how bad things have become (and/or the cognitive inflexibilities of age, including my own) but I took some comfort in a set of interviews with people who supported Trump that was published in *The New York Times* under the headline, “The Trump Voters Who Don’t Believe Trump.” The interviews made clear that, for example, “when the former president endorses violence and proposes using the government to attack his enemies, many of his supporters assume it’s just an act” (McCreesh, 2024). These supporters and I might have other issues about which we disagree, like the importance of integrity in a presidential candidate, but at least we do not disagree that violence is something to be avoided. In other words, while our moral habits of acting, thinking, and speaking might be difficult to change, these habits might not be as different from each other as we might have thought.

And identifying the content of our habits, learning what we *actually* think about these kinds of moral issues, where “we” now includes all of us, will only happen when we talk to each other. Failing to do so has serious consequences, as recently explained by Kwame Anthony Appiah (2024). In response to a question to “The Ethicist” from Nov. 29, 2024, about whether those who support Trump should be held responsible for the threats to democracy that he posed in his actions (or inactions) on Jan. 6, 2021, Appiah replied:

In a study published last year, researchers at U.C. Berkeley and M.I.T. provided evidence that democratic back-sliding around the world—with citizens voting for authoritarian leaders—is driven in part by voters who believe in democracy but doubt that the other side does. The researchers found that such voters, once shown the actual levels of support for democracy among their opponents, became less likely to vote for candidates who violated democratic norms. *The general point is that not understanding the actual views of people of other parties—and assuming the worst of them—can be dangerous for democracy.*

Appiah, 2024, *emphasis mine*

The study Appiah referenced was by Braley *et al* (2023) which found that “us partisans are willing to subvert democratic norms to the extent that they believe opposing partisans are willing to do the same.” At the root of the problem here is not so much the subversion of democratic norms, as the lack of empathy that allows us to so easily believe others have an affinity for this kind of subversion when in fact they do not.

4.3 Developing empathy

That empathy could be taught or developed was new to me, but doing so is a key element of the educational project for Peace Literacy to which I now contribute (peaceliteracy.org). I worked on a pilot study to assess the efficacy of Peace Literacy curriculum in developing empathy (Montfort, Betts, and Clough, 2025). A call to develop our capacity for empathy might seem to stray away from the epistemic issues on which I have focused, but empathy, I argue, is required for communicating, especially across differences (Clough, 2020b). In her essay “Empathic Knowledge: The Importance of Empathy’s Social Epistemology,” Georgina Campelia argues that we need to conceive of empathy “as a social epistemic practice within which knowledge is formed and confirmed with others” (Campelia, 2017, 530).

Returning to “Charity, Peace, and the Social Epistemology of Science Controversies” (2020b) I argued that Campelia’s account “overlaps with Davidson’s model of interpretational charity and triangulation, not just to the elements of active attention that we might sort as epistemic, but also to the kinds of attention we might sort as moral because social” (Clough, 2020b, 134). Davidson’s focus on interpretational charity assumes that we

recognize each other as interlocutors, but the conditions for that recognition require the development of empathy.

[...] At a very basic level, identifying similarities, identifying common ground, is made possible by our ability to recognize each other empathically as people with whom we might actually communicate. But to recognize each other empathically as people with whom we can communicate, we need the identification of common ground. Empathy involves a feedback loop between caring for someone and recognizing similarities between ours and other's emotional states and points of view, but there is also a feedback loop between empathy and the identification of common ground. Finding common ground with someone helps us have empathy for them and vice versa.

All of these conditions must be present, arising together in some measure, for communication to be possible. These three features—empathy, common ground, and communication—cycle together. Coordinating all of this takes practice and skill. But we do it more or less successfully, all the time.

Clough, 2020b, 135

I do not mean here to minimize the very real differences that exist among members of the American public, say, nor do I mean to downplay the fact that I have never had to do anything other than *imagine* what it would be like to have a conversation with someone who endorsed violence against people who hold my political views. I think these kinds of conversations are critical and there are experts with the peace skills required to have them, but these dangerous scenarios are statistically swamped by the more prosaic and everyday opportunities for communication across difference—opportunities for conversation that we all probably want to avoid, but that we should all get better at having. Let's reflect on conversations with someone who thinks that universities are elitist institutions filled with faculty selected for their liberal bias, say (you are free to imagine here whatever a difficult conversation would look like where you didn't fear for your physical safety, but you were none-the-less uncomfortable enough that you really would rather not engage).

In the current political climate, we are losing our capacity for empathy, or it is becoming increasingly restricted to a smaller and smaller community. It is getting harder to recognize our similarities with those outside our communities. As we lose our capacity for empathy, I have

argued, “we become more confident about the accuracy of our claims and the inaccuracy of all others, and we communicate less.” In this way, “empathy and epistemic humility are critical conditions of phronesis, of the engaged practice of objective evidential deliberation, of communication” (Clough 2020b, 138–139).

5. Conclusion

What is required for the solidarity work of widening the community of people to whom we are responsible includes the expansion of the notion of interpretational charity to include the empathic recognition of our interlocutors, the extension of invitations to difficult conversations through an appeal to common ground, the practice of taking the time to listen and engage epistemic humility. Together these practices help us develop trust around a critical truth of the matter articulated by Andrea Gibson, another scholar/poet who left us too soon. Gibson writes: “*We are all in this together, doing pretty much the best that we can, pretty much all the time*” (Gibson, 2023). Gibson went for the laugh by noting that if what we are seeing is people doing their best, this just shows that most people’s best is pretty bad. But we pragmatists know, as Gibson did, that with practice we can get better.

And while the problems of communicating across difference have become increasingly intractable in the last few years, upon reflection they are problems that crop up at any time for anyone who finds herself a political outsider in a given domain, intent on ameliorating unjust conditions—a feminist philosopher of science say (Clough, 2003), or a field linguist-turned social critic as Bjørn describes her (Ramberg, 1988). I continue to be grateful that I had Bjørn’s guidance as I was first learning how to navigate these problems. To be sure, the navigational skills required are not the kind that one ever finishes learning; and my various and perennial lapses are entirely my responsibility. But working with Bjørn gave me my start.

When we first met, Bjørn was an expat in Canada and too soon, even before I finished my PhD, I left Canada to become an ex-pat in the us. I wonder if there is something about the (not quite) radical interpretation required for surviving and thriving as an ex-pat that informs the interest I share with Bjørn in widening the circle of community, or at least our shared interest in removing philosophical barriers to the project. It seems likely to have informed our shared conviction that it can be done.

Acknowledgements

Thank you first to my mentor and friend Bjørn Torgrim Ramberg, without whom not. Thank you also to Yvonne Huetter-Almerigi and Rob Sinclair for inviting me to be part of this celebration for Bjørn, to Kent Staley for the invitation to be part of the *Pragmatism and Scientific Inquiry* conference at St. Louis University where I worked out some of the kinks in this paper, and to Ge Fang for his commentary that identified some of the kinks that needed attention. Finally, thank you to Paul K. Chappell whose life work challenges me as a public philosopher to take the work of charity and peace beyond academia.

Notes

I wanted to acknowledge a recent essay by David Coady (2024) who sees problematic appeals to conceptual schemes in the language of “echo chambers” and argues that we should dispense with this language. I think the concept of an echo chamber is still helpful though I agree that we need to take care to avoid the self-defeating relativism that Coady associates with it. I find that Kelly Furman’s essay “Epistemic Bunkers” (2023) extends these concepts in all the right directions.

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