



**SERRC**

Social Epistemology  
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>

ISSN: 2471-9560

Relationships and Identity: A Reply to Hannon

Brandon Morgan-Olsen, Loyola University Chicago, [bmorganolsen@luc.edu](mailto:bmorganolsen@luc.edu)

---

Morgan-Olsen, Brandon. 2022. "Relationships and Identity: A Reply to Hannon." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 11 (7): 15-21. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-6YT>.

I have taken on the task of writing a reply to a reply, which, to be honest, I find rather delightful in the context of a discussion about deliberation and its concomitant obligations. Michael Hannon’s “Is There a Duty to Speak Your Mind?” is a fair and thoughtful response to Hrishikesh Joshi’s interesting book, *Why It’s OK to Speak your Mind*. In an attempt to be similarly fair and thoughtful in my response to Hannon, I should begin by being transparent about what I take my task to entail.

### **How Should One Reply to a Response?**

It would be wrongheaded to attempt to launch a defense of Joshi against Hannon’s objections. That would seem to me to be a task, primarily, for Joshi. Similarly, it would be misguided for me to add a host of my own criticisms to Hannon’s list. That would be another reply to Joshi, rather than a reply to Hannon. Ultimately, I think it best for me to spend most of my time here pointing towards a few issues that have not gotten much attention in the discussion thus far, but that I find significant and relevant. My hope is that, in doing so, I might provide some resources that will help us all come to more settled conclusions about the obligations we have when speaking our minds.

To that end, I would like to emphasize two points. First, we limit the effectiveness of our moral conclusions if we attempt an isolated analysis on one participant or role in a conversation. For example, as I have suggested elsewhere (Morgan-Olsen 2013), one cannot fully determine the duties of speakers without also accounting for the duties of listeners. To do so is to ignore the relational aspects of these obligations. Second, we philosophers have a tendency to overemphasize the epistemic aims and consequences of deliberation—watching carefully for how much truth one can wring out of a public discussion—while neglecting other features of deliberative processes. In particular, I rarely see explicit enough acknowledgment that public deliberation is, importantly, a process of self-identification, other-identification, and, perhaps most relevantly, the creation of civic friendship.

### **Deliberative Obligations as Relational Obligations**

I want to suggest that Joshi’s and Hannon’s analyses both abstract away from an important element of the moral equation: those *to whom* we are speaking our minds. Joshi’s duty becomes active by the existence of social pressure against one’s held view,<sup>1</sup> and there are a few other things he argues we need to take into account when determining the nature of our duties. Following Lackey (2020), he claims the speaker’s social standing—i.e., presence or lack of social privilege—is relevant, as are the contributions of other group members to the epistemic commons (Joshi 2021, 41-42). Further, Joshi states that the potential costs to us in

---

<sup>1</sup> For what it’s worth, I read Joshi as making a case for an obligation to speak up that is conditional on social pressure. In other words, on my reading, Joshi’s claim is as follows: if there is social pressure against one’s view, then one has a *prima facie* duty to speak up. This would mean that Hannon is incorrect in saying “[a]ccording to Joshi, there is no duty to speak your mind when pressure to confirm is absent” (Hannon 2021, 6). If my interpretation is correct, Joshi is not explicitly claiming *anything*, one way or the other, about our duties when such pressure is absent.

forwarding our evidence must also factor in (37). On the other hand, the contours of the duty do not seem to depend on whether we are talking to fellow structural engineers (8-9, 35-36), metaethicists (25), members of our social group who hold differing views about the ethics of abortion (14), or our grandmothers (39).

But, in order to get a full-blooded story of the extent of our duties, don't we need to account more concretely for the contexts of these deliberations? In other words, doesn't it matter what others *are* doing, what they *should* be doing, and who they *are in relation to us* in figuring out our own responsibilities? Indeed, I am inclined to believe we cannot come to complete conclusions about a speaker's obligations without thinking about the actions, attitudes, and responsibilities of their interlocutors. Theorists sometimes speak as if every deliberative event is a momentous occasion, where one takes the stage in front of a willing audience to have their contribution logged into the annals of history. Deliberation—even significant, influential deliberation—rarely happens like that. It is generally a smaller, messier thing, embedded in the sorts of conversational pragmatics and conventions that we navigate regularly.

This is not to say that Joshi doesn't recognize any sort of context-dependence to his duty. He counsels that we should pick our timing well (to “keep our powder dry”) and be cognizant of ingroup and outgroup dynamics to improve the effectiveness of our interventions (2021, 42-43). The lesson he draws here is thus that we will need to be strategic in fulfilling our duties, with the caveat that “. . . what strategy is appropriate will be heavily context dependent, in a way that makes any general recommendations otiose” (43). However, it is an oversight to gloss over such contextual details so quickly. Many of these details—such as considerations of what is going on with one's audience—are more than merely strategically relevant; rather, they themselves are morally determinative.

I believe that Hannon identifies some of what is missing when, at the end of his piece, he urges Joshi to shift focus towards analysis of our social environments more broadly. Hannon states:

Instead of expecting individuals to stick out their neck by speaking up, perhaps we should put more focus on changing the *culture and norms* that govern public discourse . . . instead of arguing that individuals have a duty to speak their mind, perhaps it is more important to foster social environments in which individuals do not feel pressure to self-censor in the first place (Hannon 2022, 14; emphasis original).

I agree with the spirit of this suggestion and want to suggest that Hannon is here pointing towards one aspect of the audience that needs attention:<sup>2</sup> *structural* issues that work to inhibit public discourse. The social pressures that Joshi rightly speaks of as often stifling one's urge

---

<sup>2</sup> I'm not sure I'm yet convinced that one or the other project is *more* important. It seems like we can get a lot from engaging in both projects. But that is a small point, and one with which I imagine Hannon would not have substantive issues.

to speak and contribute are features of our social structure. But it would be easy to walk away from Joshi's book with the impression that this social pressure is a rigid, fixed fact of our world that we must press against. And, while I acknowledge that sometimes it can feel that way, the truth is that social structures—the sorts of social background conditions that Habermas names 'lifeworlds' (Habermas 1981)—are ultimately constructed by people. Indeed, they are essentially made up *of* people. As such, while it is crucial to analyze how our social structures serve to get in the way—frustratingly, inconveniently,<sup>3</sup> unjustly—it is equally crucial to remember that they shift, change, and can be nudged in a salutary fashion by people behaving well. In short, Hannon is correct to propose that we pay more attention to how we can reduce social pressure in our environment.<sup>4</sup>

That said, I want to gesture further at why continuing to press in this direction is so important, both in general and for the full completion of Joshi's own project. The obligations at the heart of Joshi's analysis are relational. By this I mean both that they are dependent on the relationship between the individuals under discussion and that these individuals' obligations are importantly interconnected.<sup>5</sup> Thus, while it is enlightening to call attention to the macro-level societal structures that impact deliberation, as Hannon urges us to do, we must also take into account the smaller-scale, interpersonal dynamics that are relevant to what we, morally speaking, should do. Bear with me for a moment because, to make this point, I want to draw an analogy with moral determinations around consent.

I hope that we would all be skeptical of an account of the morality of consent that focuses exclusively on the consenting party, with no regard for the context or the other parties involved. While of course there are useful, general things to say about the obligations of a consenting party (e.g., they ought to be clear as clear as possible in expressing their intentions, goals, boundaries, etc.), this is only the beginning of the story. Claiming that one ought to read the medical form carefully is meaningless without a great deal of assumptions about the sorts of things those forms should say and the reliability of the institutions and individuals who created and are administering the process.

I like to think that we, as a society, have made some progress in thinking more expansively in related ways about consent in intimate situations. We have updated our standards beyond "no means no" and "yes means yes" toward a standard of "enthusiastic consent". This contemporary standard asks us to ensure that the situation is one that can truly nurture

---

<sup>3</sup> I'm thinking here of, e.g., an accounting of the various "hermeneutical impasses" at play in our society (Anderson 2017).

<sup>4</sup> To be clear, Joshi does have an eye on the sorts of thing we might need to do to appropriately decrease social pressure. As Hannon points out, Joshi discusses a "duty to *make it less costly for others to share evidence*" (2022, 13, emphasis original). As another example, in discussing the persistence of ideological majorities, Joshi states "[t]he point of importance here is that one way in which individuals can take steps to improve the epistemic commons ... is to try to curb the majority's tendencies towards such behavior" (2021, 49). However, Hannon is right to say that such concerns are far from Joshi's primary focus.

<sup>5</sup> One might object that all social obligations are relational in this sense. However, I don't think that is correct. My negative obligation to not shove you into the pool without provocation is technically relational in that *I* have the obligation in relation to *you* (or that my obligation relates to your correlative right), but generally I can fulfill that obligation independently of your actions.

enthusiasm, which requires a great deal of all involved parties. We understand that saying “they have an obligation to say no if they feel uncomfortable” is morally insufficient. We know that we need to know more: who the parties are, what their relation is to each other, if and how power is being exerted, what has been said, suggested, and done prior to this moment. Onora O’Neill elaborates beautifully on this point, arguing that true, morally legitimate consent can only take place in a space where dissent is genuinely possible. Moreover, she emphasizes that constructing such a space involves treating others as the persons they are, as opposed to hypothetical rational creatures (O’Neill 1985). In short, figuring out what our moral duties are with regard to consent must necessarily involve a great deal of relational work.

While of course they are different in many ways, I am suggesting that our civic deliberative obligations are analogously relational. If I am right about this, it means that thus far in the discussion there has been too much of a spotlight on our potential speaker’s duties, meaning there is a lot of ground to cover that neither Joshi nor Hannon have really explored.<sup>6</sup> Some of this territory is reasonably straightforward. For example, if there was absolutely no chance of ever getting deliberative uptake—in the extreme case of Hannon’s objection 4.6 (2022, 10-11) where you knew for certain that no one would ever listen to you—I think it is clear you have no obligation to speak up, at least in terms of your obligation to improve the epistemic commons. (In this case, it is still possible you have an obligation to yourself, or that speaking would be good for its own sake.) This implies that others have a related, imperfect, *prima facie* duty to provide you with uptake. In other words, someone, sometimes has a duty to listen to you.

However, there are a many more pertinent relational considerations, some of which will get significantly complicated. Positionality is one such consideration. If you are the type of person who is physically incapable of ever undergoing an abortion procedure, that tempers your obligation to express your views about the ethics of abortion, especially if you are talking to someone who is so able. In such a case, you likely have more of an obligation to listen than to speak up and, vice versa, they have less of an obligation to listen to you if you do decide to speak your mind. Relations of power are another consideration, beyond just considering relative costs of speech to each party. We need to bring more of these concerns into the picture to have a full account of how we ought to act in public deliberation.

We must remember that taking proper care of the epistemic commons is importantly dissimilar to taking care of other public goods. Discussing proper environmental stewardship of a wetlands, for example, is not the same as engaging in said stewardship. In contrast, the epistemic commons is itself a social structure, meaning that it is constituted by people—it is ultimately nothing more than a network of relationships. The people that you enter into deliberation with are themselves a part of the object of concern.

---

<sup>6</sup> I take it that many of these concerns have been at work in the background of the discussion without being explicitly addressed. For example, part of what is at play in the ugly sweater case—where Joshi claims we do not have an obligation to tell Grandma that we don’t like her gift—is not just the fact that this information isn’t that important to the epistemic commons, but because it is our grandma we are talking about, and we have a certain kind of relation to her that is relevant.

## Recognition In Addition to Relevance

I have a worry about academics, myself included, who spend time theorizing about public deliberation. The worry is that we too quickly become invested in the knowledge-production part of reasoning together and end up undervaluing other things that are going on. One way to frame this point is to say that we become obsessed with relevance. In a move that we can trace at least back to John Stuart Mill and his arguments for free expression, we tend to narrowly evaluate a deliberative contribution in terms of its evidentiary potential—its likelihood to bolster an argument for some proposition or other.

This is important, to be sure, but so is the fact that public deliberation involves a form of what Charles Taylor named a “politics of recognition”. Taylor argues that our identity-formation is not monological. In other words, dialogue with others is a constitutive element of how we come to identify ourselves and others. Thus, part of what politics must entail is the maintenance of properly respectful recognition of each other’s identities, with special care to avoid misrecognition of those who have been historically excluded from dominant discourses (Taylor 1992).

This leads to the second missing piece I want to identify in the Joshi/Hannon discussion. Joshi acknowledges that reasoning in public often ends up being implicated in identity-formation and recognition. However, he generally characterizes this in a negative light, as a phenomenon that gets in the way of the healthy functioning of the epistemic commons by creating social pressure. For example, he states:

[Social] pressures are often tied to issues regarding which taking a particular stand is important to people’s *identity* in some way – be it social, political, religious, national, or professional. What’s more, people will often publicly display *anger* towards those who share evidence supporting disfavored conclusions of this sort (Joshi 2021, 18; emphasis original).

Hannon correctly points out a startling implication of Joshi’s view: we should avoid politics, especially the tribalism of political parties, if we want to be good thinkers and reduce the potential for epistemic blind spots (2022, 5-6). He pushes Joshi on this point, but most of the considerations Hannon raises here are epistemic, which is to say reasons that political factions might end up being good for knowledge-production after all.

However, again, I think that our normative analysis of speaking our minds is missing something important if we don’t acknowledge the facets of public reason that go beyond the epistemic. Take QAnon as an example. I certainly agree with Hannon that members of QAnon are a paradigm case of those likely to produce “testimonial garbage”, such that we should balk at the suggestion they be encouraged—morally obligated, even!—to speak their minds (2022, 8). But the fact that their beliefs are outrageously mistaken is not the most pressing thing about the phenomena that is the QAnon movement. As Mike Rothschild argues convincingly, QAnon provides its members with community, a purpose, a basis for

self-respect and hope, as well as an identity. Many members of QAnon self-identify as digital soldiers or “autists”, fighting for what they perceive to be a noble, moral cause (Rothschild 2021). In their deliberations and sharing of “evidence”, they seem to get very real human needs met, despite the fact that their reasons are irredeemably flawed and their goals are delusional.

My point is not that QAnon is serving its members well, but rather that QAnon is compelling exactly because it is providing something beyond knowledge, something important for humans that these people have, unfortunately, not been able to find healthy sources for elsewhere in civic life. If we are to be thinking about properly functioning models of public reasoning, we should be attending to these real needs of recognition and community that ought to come along with public dialogue and discussion. Rather than lament the fact that humans identify with their beliefs, we should take this into account when assessing our deliberative obligations. We ought to be ensuring that our deliberative practices recognize others, providing solid ground for authentic identities. We have work to do here.

I am reasonably convinced by theories of democracy that cast many of our civic obligations—including responsibilities of public reason—in terms of civic friendship, such as Schwarzenbach (2009), Lister (2013), and Talisse (2019). Many of the ideals of civic friendship are tied up with the practice of speaking our minds, in ways that go beyond maintenance of the epistemic commons. But they also seem foundational for a healthy epistemic commons. Without equity, trust, relations of care, etc., the very existence of such a public resource seems at risk.

### **Have I Fulfilled My Deliberative Obligation?**

I hope to have played my part in this discussion adequately, contributing something significant to an already rich conversation by introducing a couple of relevant considerations that I believe haven’t already been touched on. My first claim was that a full analysis of one’s duties to speak one’s mind will need to account for more than what Joshi and Hannon mention. In particular, such an analysis will need to take into account the relationship between the speaker and their interlocutors, as well as the reciprocal duties of those interlocutors. My second claim was that a complete normative analysis will also have to acknowledge the non-epistemic goals and consequences of deliberations. Deliberators are doing more than just seeking truth; they are also engaging in acts of identification and recognition. Extending our analysis into these two areas will provide a more complete picture of the moral matters involved when deciding whether, and how, to speak our minds.

### **Acknowledgments**

Many thanks and much appreciation to Rachel White-Domain for listening to me talk through these ideas and generally supporting me in all things. Thanks also to great conversations on this topic with Marisol Brito, Alex Fink, Aany Tazmin-Ewing, and Korey

Ewing. Finally, thanks to Alex and Aany, in particular, for their stellar proofreading and editing assistance.

## References

- Anderson, Luwvll. 2017. "Hermeneutical Impasses." *Philosophical Topics* 45 (2): 1-19.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1981. *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Hannon, Michael. 2022. "Is There a Duty to Speak Your Mind?" *Social Epistemology*: 1-15. doi: 10.1080/02691728.2022.2045382.
- Joshi, Hrishikesh. 2021. *Why it's OK to Speak Your Mind*. New York: Routledge.
- Lackey, Jennifer. 2020. "The Duty to Object." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 101 (1): 35-60.
- Lister, Andrew. 2013. *Public Reason and Political Community*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Morgan-Olsen, Brandon. 2013. "A Duty to Listen: Epistemic Obligations and Public Deliberation." *Social Theory and Practice* 39 (2): 185-212.
- O'Neill, Onora. 1985. "Between Consenting Adults." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14 (3): 252-277.
- Rothschild, Mike. 2021. *The Storm is Upon Us: How QAnon Became a Movement, Cult, and Conspiracy Theory of Everything*. Brooklyn: Melville House.
- Schwarzenbach, Sibyl. 2009. *On Civic Friendship: Including Women in the State*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Talisse, Robert B. 2019. *Overdoing Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 1992. "The Politics of Recognition." In *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* edited by Amy Gutmann, 25-73. Princeton: Princeton University Press.