Friendship and Blackballing for Bad Beliefs

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Abstract
Many people believe that we should not be friends with others if they have bad enough moral and political beliefs. For instance, they think that we should not befriend KKK members or Nazis. However, not all errors in moral and political belief disqualify people from friendship. If so, then there is some line to be drawn somewhere which indicates when a person's beliefs are bad enough that we should not befriend them. This paper considers many candidate proposals for how and why to draw the line, including that beliefs might be extreme, be held irrationally, dehumanize others, are unreasonable, and more. However, upon inspection, each candidate proposal fails. They either provide the wrong kind of reason to reject people as friends, or they fail to explain what counts as 'bad enough' beliefs. There are various arguments in favour of rejecting people from friendship on the basis of their bad beliefs, but these arguments also fail to explain what counts as 'bad enough'. Thus, this paper concludes there is a genuine puzzle: we should indeed blackball some people from friendship when their beliefs are bad enough, but we do not have even a rough specification of what counts as bad enough.

1. Introduction

Some people think friendship should overcome political and moral divisions. Others think we should refuse to befriend anyone, and should dump current friends, if they believe bad things.

A recent blogpost by philosopher Rebecca Roache illustrates the second approach:

> [...] the view that I have arrived at today is that openly supporting a political party that – in the name of austerity – withdraws support from the poor, the sick, the foreign, and the unemployed while rewarding those in society who are least in need of reward [...], that wants to scrap the Human Rights Act [...] – to express one's support for a political party that does these things is as objectionable as expressing racist, sexist, or homophobic views. Racism, sexism, and homophobia are not simply misguided

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> views like any other; views that we can hope to change through reasoned debate (although we can try to do that). They are offensive views. They are views that lose you friends and respect […].
>
> […] I'm tired of reasoned debate about politics – at least for a day or two. I don't want to be friends with racists, sexists, or homophobes. And I don't want to be friends with conservatives either. (Roache, 2015)

Empirical work on political behaviour finds these sentiments are common. Most people try to avoid befriending, working with, or even living near people with whom they disagree about political or moral matters (Mutz, 2006).

In common language and slang, we might refer to such behaviours as blackballing, shunning, political and moral segregation, or ostracism. In this paper, I will use the term 'normative blackballing' to refer to the behaviour of rejecting someone (for some position, office, or relationship) because of that person's moral or political views. This paper specifically focuses on whether and to what degree normative blackballing in *friendship* is justified.

Many people believe that, unless there are special countervailing circumstances, one ought not to befriend or remain friends with Nazis or KKK grand dragons. If that is correct, then normative blackballing is sometimes justified. If so, this raises some questions: at what point are a person's views bad enough to merit unfriending or refusing to befriend them? What, roughly, is the line between acceptable and unacceptable normative views for our friends? What principle explains when people should be blackballed and when they remain eligible for friendship?

In this paper, I will examine a wide range of popular and intuitively plausible candidate explanations and principles for how to draw the line. However, all of these candidate principles fail. Some fail on their own merits, because on closer examination they give the wrong kind of reason to blackball people from friendship. Others fail because they cannot answer the 'how bad?' question. Upon inspection, they do not help us draw a line, not even a fuzzy one. It is hard to construct any good theory of when a person merits blackballing. We are left with 'when their beliefs are bad enough' but cannot produce even a rough specification of 'bad enough'.

2. Reasons for Blackballing

I will begin by reviewing a series of arguments which seem to justify the practice of blackballing people from friendship.

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The Basic Argument

It seems easy to justify normative blackballing by referencing specific cases. Consider this argument:

1. By definition, normative blackballing is the view that one should not be friends with people because of their normative beliefs. Thus, if there are any cases where one should not be friends with someone because of their normative beliefs, then normative blackballing is justified.
2. Unless there are countervailing circumstances, one should not be friends with Nazis or KKK members.
3. Therefore, *at least some* normative blackballing is justified.

Premise 2 mentions 'countervailing circumstances'. Rather than offering a full account of such circumstances, I offer some examples. Consider, for instance, Daryl Davis, a black man who actively cultivated friendship with KKK members in order to reform them. He convinced two hundred Klansmen to relinquish their robes (Brown, 2017). Davis's actions are noble and heroic, not wrongful. Relatedly, in Christian thought, Jesus befriended sinners, but taught them to avoid sin. So, premise 2 should include exceptions for what we might call 'redemptive friendship'.

Further, what we owe our friends depends in part upon our shared history. Suppose Bob saved my life in the war, donated his kidney to save my dying child, and has generally been an excellent friend for the past twenty years. If he recently became ensnared by KKK propaganda, perhaps I should remain his friend, though I might be justified in blackballing others with such beliefs.

I recognize some might reject premise 2, but I suspect most readers accept it. If so, then it is easy to defend blackballing by pointing to cases. The problem, then, will be explaining both what justifies blackballing, and where and how to draw the line.

Let's now consider some arguments and reasons which purport to justify blackballing. The case for blackballing begins by claiming that moral and political opinions are not mere expressions of taste, such as opinions about music and wine. These opinions concern matters of justice, poverty and prosperity, peace and war, oppression and equality, coercion and freedom, right and wrong, the normative status of persons, the value of life, and so on.

Mistaken or false beliefs about these moral and political issues are thus not quite like mistaken and false beliefs in other domains. It is foolish to believe the earth is flat, but the content of the belief has little moral import. However, to have mistaken moral or political

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beliefs can mean one advocates things that are in fact immoral and unjust. If justice requires J, then the more a person's beliefs depart from J, the more they advocate injustice.

Such advocacy or belief is almost always *de re* rather than *de dicto*. Few people say, 'I advocate injustice' under that description. Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Pol Pot, Mao Zedong, and Josef Stalin probably believed what they advocated was just. Members of the KKK think their racism (which some refuse even to label *racism*) is required by justice.

In a recent paper, Christopher Freiman and I claim that most people believe in 'doxastic obligations', defined here as obligations to believe certain things and not to believe others. To illustrate, imagine someone holds deeply racist beliefs but never acts on or expresses those beliefs in any outwardly detectable way. Most people would not merely say that these beliefs are mistaken, or that the person who holds these beliefs has a flawed character; they would say that holding the beliefs is itself morally wrong and that we have a duty not to think that way (Brennan and Freiman, 2020).

Further, in the real world, people generally act upon their political beliefs by donating money to politicians, parties, or think tanks, by organizing and canvassing for causes, by trying to convince others to adopt their views, and finally by voting for these positions. Their moral beliefs influence how they treat others in daily interaction.

Below, I will consider additional grounds one might give for normative blackballing. These include that friendship ought to be based in part on desert, that befriending certain people 'expresses' something wrongful, that befriending people aids and abets their badness or involves complicity with their wrongful behaviours, and that befriending people with bad beliefs can corrupt one's character.

Friendship and Desert

Many theories of friendship hold that friendship should be based partly on desert or merit. A person's moral character is both grounds for determining whether to start a new friendship and whether to continue an old one. Friendship should be based in part on the recognition of others' moral worth. To continue to be friends or to choose to befriend certain people is to create or continue a relationship they do not deserve. For instance, if Jane is cruel to me while Kerry is kind, then Kerry deserves my friendship more than Jane. All things equal, if I pick Jane over Kerry, Kerry has a

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legitimate complaint against me. One might think that Nazis and KKK members do not deserve friendship because of their bad beliefs.

What We Express by Befriending

Friendship with the wrong people might also *express* wrongful attitudes. On many leading accounts of friendship (Helm, 2017), proper friendship is based in part on recognition and respect for the friend's moral qualities. To befriend someone is, to some degree, to *endorse* them as a person.

Most people believe there are expressive obligations. For instance, they believe we must not utter racial slurs. Many philosophers also hold that certain policies or behaviours which are not instances of speech nevertheless communicate or express ideas. Policies and behaviours might be right or wrong based in part on what they 'express' or 'signal'.

For instance, some philosophers think democracy is justified in part because it *expresses* the idea that people are equal, or that non-democratic systems are wrongful because they *express* the idea that people are unequal (Anderson, 2009; Christiano, 2008, p. 98; Estlund, 2007, p. 37; Gilbert, 2012; Griffin, 2003; Nozick, 1990, p. 286). Relatedly, some object to commodifying various goods and services, such as kidneys or sex, on the grounds that commodification expresses wrongful attitudes (Sandel, 2012).

One might say something similar about befriending certain people with bad normative views. Perhaps to befriend a known Klan member, without countervailing reasons, is to express that their badness is not so bad or is not to be taken too seriously. Suppose Bob is fascist. Am I permitted to ignore his attitudes because Bob tells good jokes, has a backyard pool, and also loves bowling? This seems to trivialize justice.

Friendship as Complicity with Wrongdoing

Relatedly, one might think that to befriend certain people means aiding and abetting their bad beliefs.[1] After all, people respond to social pressure. Perhaps blackballing people for their bad normative

[1] Isserow (2018) criticizes this view.

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views pressures them to change. Perhaps friendship emboldens bad people.

Of course, this kind of argument depends on the actual consequences of friendship or withdrawing friendship. It's possible instead that blackballing Klan members could lead to even worse consequences. They might then only have other Klan members as friends, which might embolden them further and make them more extreme.

In the law, complicity is not merely turning a blind eye to injustice or doing nothing to stop it. In the law, to be complicit in another's crime, one must actively counsel them, encourage them, and/or aid them in specific ways. Not every action that causally contributes to a crime counts as complicity. So, without here resolving what exactly counts as complicity, I will note that complicity will only be an occasional worry, which occurs only when our friendship with others aids their wrongdoing in the right way.

Friendship and Moral Risk

Let's consider one last reason for blackballing: befriending people with rotten views exposes us to moral risk. For instance, to befriend a racist is to risk becoming a racist and acting in racist ways.

The problem of moral risk concerns what we ought to do in cases where we have good reason to believe we might mistakenly make morally wrong choices. Moral risk often occurs because we recognize that our decisions could place us in compromised positions which make us more likely to act wrongly in the future. For instance, having a few drinks in an attractive stranger's hotel room increases one's risk of cheating on one's spouse. Perhaps befriending racists risks becoming racist.

Sometimes we should avoid certain actions because there is too much moral risk. For instance, suppose one determines that historically, humanitarian interventions often fail and that the intervening country's soldiers often commit mass moral atrocities. If so, then perhaps our leaders should not authorize a new intervention, even if our cause is just. Perhaps a concern for moral risk means we should avoid eating meat, or take steps to reduce the number of abortions, since there is some non-trivial chance that these actions are deeply wrong (Moller, 2011).

Consider what risks are involved in forming friendships. Many psychological studies show that people tend to conform to group behaviour (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004; Mori and Arai, 2010;

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Sunstein, 2019; Rose, 2021). Some psychologists claim that when we are surrounded by liars or cheaters, we tend to lie and cheat more, and we come to believe lying and cheating are less bad (Ariely, 2013, p. 204; Shu, Gino, and Bazerman, 2011). If such research is correct, we should choose our friends wisely. We have grounds to avoid befriending those who would induce us to adopt wrongful attitudes and engage in wrongful behaviours.

Of course, how strong the presumption is against friendship depends on the degree of risk. Many actions – from having a beer to reading a novel to befriending anyone other than a saint – involve some degree of risk of moral compromise. Presumably whether befriending someone is wrong depends upon the degree of risk.

To summarize, there are many arguments of varying strength on behalf of normative blackballing in friendship. However, they do not answer this question: how bad must someone's beliefs be before we may or should blackball them from friendship?

3. How to Draw the Line

Intuitively, we should not befriend Nazis or KKK members, at least not without countervailing conditions. Intuitively, we may nevertheless befriend some people who have incorrect moral views; not every mistaken moral belief disqualifies one from friendship. If so, where and how do we draw the line?

When people defend normative blackballing, they usually try to distinguish between allowable views and those beyond the pale. We might say that there is a distinction between reasonable or unreasonable views, qualifying or disqualifying views, or acceptable or unacceptable views.

But this merely affixes labels to either side of the distinction. It is like giving Latin names to a disease without diagnosing the cause. We still need a proper, substantive theory of what that distinction is.

The problem, we will see, is that attempting to give a substantive account of how to draw the line (even an abstract or fuzzy line) seems always to fail. Some promising candidate principles turn out, on further inspection, to give the wrong kinds of reasons. Others fail to provide any real guidance on what counts as 'bad enough'.

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Sincerity

One candidate theory is that bad normative beliefs do not disqualify people from friendship so long as people *sincerely* believe that what they advocate is good and just. Suppose someone sincerely wants, *de dicto*, to promote justice or do the right thing, but they have mistaken beliefs about what is just or right. At least in this case, they have a sort of abstract moral commitment to morality and justice. Here, one might think, they are morally better than a person who knows something is wrong but supports it anyway.

However, this candidate theory seems mistaken. In some cases, sincerity makes someone worse, not better. For instance, a sincere Nazi is a morally worse person than a mere opportunist, conformist, or frightened collaborator. Perhaps a sincere racist is worse than someone who knows better but is too cowardly to resist prevailing racist norms. If a son attends his father's Klan meeting for fear of his father's disapproval, we might judge the sincere father worse than the insincere son. The true believer is often worse and more deserving of blackballing than the insincere person.

Sincerity matters, but it is not always exculpatory. Intuitively, some sincere people should be blackballed for their views, and their sincerity sometimes gives us greater, not lesser, reason to blackball them.

Departures from Convention/the Mainstream

Another candidate way to draw line is to take mainstream views as the baseline, and then hold that sufficient departure from the mainstream merits blackballing. After all, people often say that extremism is bad or that we should avoid extremist views. 'Extremism' here refers to strong departure from middle-of-the-road, widely held moral views.

On its face, though, this simply prompts us to ask *how much* departure from the mainstream disqualifies one from friendship. But the initial puzzle was to determine where to draw the line – how bad must a view be for a person to deserve blackballing? Even if we accept the current proposal, we are still stuck asking how extreme a view must be to merit blackballing. The current proposal does not provide any obvious boundary. (Should it be two standard deviations from the median voter?)

Regardless, we have little reason to endorse this proposal, even though many people invoke it. This proposal seems to misunderstand

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the problem. What disqualifies someone from friendship is not the *weirdness* or *unorthodoxy* of their beliefs, but their beliefs' *badness*.

After all, the person with weird or unorthodox beliefs might be *correct*. For instance, in the past, when almost everyone advocated wars of conquest, this would not justify blackballing a person who advocates peace. In the past, almost everyone was racist, but this would not justify them blackballing someone who advocates racial equality. In the past, almost everyone advocated religious authoritarianism, but this would not justify them blackballing someone who advocates liberal tolerance. An extremist might be right, and thus should not be rejected for their extremism.

Conversely, conforming to the mainstream is not clear grounds for being immune to blackballing. Mainstream and conventional views are often evil. If you had lived in the antebellum South, perhaps you should have refused to befriend advocates of slavery, though such advocacy was mainstream.

Perhaps the claim, instead, could be that if a view is mainstream, then this partly exculpates people for holding it. After all, social epistemology suggests that if most of the seemingly decent people around you believe some view P, then this is at least some presumptive evidence of P. One might argue that it is thus less bad to be a Nazi in 1940 Germany than in 2023 Germany. It is bad in both cases, but the person in 1940 had less overwhelming evidence against Nazism than a person today. But we probably want to avoid concluding that it was therefore OK to befriend Nazis in 1940 Germany but not today, or OK to befriend KKK members in 1875 but not today.

Drawing the line around conventionality makes the theory unacceptably relativistic, which goes against the spirit of the basic argument. The reason some people are supposed to be blackballed is that they believe bad things, not that their beliefs are unusual. The problem with Nazis today is their Nazism, not their weirdness. Thus, the view that extremism is disqualifying fails. It fails to tell us just how *bad* views must be to merit blackballing. But, worse, it is simply the wrong kind of reason.

Rawlsian Reasonableness

Public reason liberalism is a political theory which holds that political regimes and laws are legitimate only if they can be justified to all reasonable people according to their own lights (Vallier, 2018). Public reason liberals say that reasonable people are people committed to living on fair and equal terms of cooperation. Philosophers attracted

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to this political theory might suggest that any reasonable person, as defined by public reason theory, is eligible for friendship, while unreasonable people are not.

However, this candidate proposal for drawing the line seems implausible. For one, public reason theory remains highly controversial, with powerful objections to the entire project.

Second, note that some (though not all) public reason theorists claim that reasonable citizens are by definition people committed to the public reason project itself (Tomasi, 2001). If we were to accept that definition and use this conception of reasonableness to draw the line for normative blackballing, this implies that only public reason liberals should have friends and that they may thus only be friends with each other. This seems absurd, though fortunately not all versions of public reason liberalism adopt the self-congratulatory position that only public reason liberals are reasonable.

Third, a deeper worry is that passing the buck to 'reasonableness' is unpromising precisely because public reason liberalism's account of reasonableness remains in a sorry state. Public reason theorists seem unsuccessful in determining what reasonableness is. Public reason liberals endlessly debate who qualifies as reasonable and why. Ryan Muldoon and Kevin Vallier, in their recent defence of the paradigm, say the debates are so intractable that there are now two separate schools of public reason theory working on distinct projects, with serious disagreement inside both schools (Vallier and Muldoon, 2021). In a comprehensive and encyclopaedic review of the theory, Vallier says that public reason liberals are united because they all agree to one very abstract principle, but he says they deeply dispute the meaning of every word in this supposedly shared principle (Vallier, 2018). If we get N public reason theorists in the room, we will get at least N theories of reasonableness.

Let's go back to the basic issue. It seems plausible that we should blackball people from friendship if their views are bad enough. If we try to use public reason theory's conception of 'reasonable' to draw the line, we replace 'bad enough' with 'unreasonable enough'. On its face, this is just replacing one unhelpful label with another, but it gets worse when we realize that public reason theorists themselves cannot even agree what counts as reasonable, except at some uselessly high level of abstraction.

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Epistemic Rationality

One might instead try to argue that what disqualifies someone from friendship is determined by their degree of epistemic rationality when forming their normative beliefs. After all, evidence seems to matter in assessing others' moral culpability for mistaken beliefs.

To illustrate, imagine both John and Kim believe they should kill Lisa. John believes this because he dreamt a genie ordered him to kill her. But Kim, in contrast, is an MI6 agent. Suppose after a lengthy investigation using proper methods, Kim justifiedly believes Lisa is a terrorist who will detonate a nuclear weapon unless Kim kills her right now. But, unfortunately for Kim, her evidence is misleading and her belief is false. Intuitively, in cases like this, there is a moral difference between John and Kim. John believes something awful for awful reasons; Kim believes something that is in fact awful, but which really does appear to be true, and she is justified in her false belief. We might condemn John for his beliefs, while thinking Kim is blameless but mistaken.

So, perhaps this helps us draw the line. Perhaps if someone is like Kim, where they believe something bad but are epistemically justified in that belief, they should not be blackballed. But if they are like John, who believes something bad for bad reasons, they should be blackballed.

Further, this candidate theory seems promising because we have at least some well-understood and widely accepted principles of epistemic rationality. While there are problem cases, we have a decent sense of where the line between rational and irrational belief is.

If this seems promising, we still need to determine how to specify the principle. One might say that a person is disqualified from friendship if they hold any normative view irrationally. Alternatively, one might say that a person deserves blackballing if they hold a sufficiently bad view irrationally. One might in addition hold that a person is not disqualified for bad views, provided they have sufficient epistemic justification or exhibit sufficient epistemic rationality in forming and holding those bad views. Alas, upon inspection, all three suggestions seem to fail.

Consider the first suggestion, which says that a person is disqualified from friendship if they hold any normative view irrationally. That seems false. Mere epistemic irrationality is poor grounds for blackballing people. After all, empirical work on voter psychology indicates that most voters form their policy preferences on the basis of highly unreliable, biased, and unscientific reasoning processes (Achen and Bartels, 2016; Lodge and Taber, 2013; Chong, 2013;

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Cohen, 2003; Erison, Lodge, and Taber, 2014; Green, 1999; Kahan, Peters, Dawson, and Slovic, 2013). Further, probably all of us have at least a few irrational beliefs about ethics or justice. If mere epistemic irrationality disqualifies people, we will have to blackball almost everyone. That seems absurd.

Further, it does not seem that even deeply irrational and unjustified beliefs always disqualify people. For instance, suppose Mike believes governments conspire to trick us into believing the earth is round. Mike is foolish, but it does not seem these foolish beliefs disqualify him from friendship.

Thus, let us consider the second variation of the current proposal. This variation says that a person who had bad beliefs, beliefs which would normally merit blackballing, should not be blackballed if they have sufficiently strong epistemic justification for those beliefs.

This also seems mistaken on its face. After all – and I realize it is uncomfortable to say this – many of the worst people in history were philosophically adept and had highly sophisticated arguments for their positions. Benito Mussolini and Giovanni Gentile's communitarian defence of fascism is sophisticated, far more philosophically sophisticated than almost all democratic citizens are in their own pro-democratic beliefs. (I regularly assign their work to gifted undergraduate students. These students are usually unable to mount a good criticism of it.) Even Hitler produced a troubling argument, based on widely shared premises (premises that most of my students accept), justifying his invasion of Slavic lands. But it seems implausible that philosophically sophisticated fascists should qualify as candidates for friendship while unsophisticated fascists should not. It seems instead that *both* should be blackballed.

Here, then, one might want to note a difference between the Kim/John case and the sophisticated fascist cases. One might say that it's at least *possible* that a suspected terrorist ought to be killed. When MI6 agent Kim believes this, she is justified but mistaken, but at least she holds a belief that *could* be true. In contrast, one might want to say that it is impossible for fascism to be the correct theory of justice. Therefore no one could ever be justified in believing it.

This seems unpromising though. One problem is that we now enter into complicated questions of what is possible. Perhaps only one theory of justice or one moral theory is *metaphysically* possible (e.g., perhaps classical liberalism is true in all possible worlds), but then many moral and political theories are *epistemically* possible (i.e., given our sorry epistemic state, many theories are compatible with what we know). Which sense of possibility matters here? Second, it is unclear we even know whether certain views are

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impossible in either sense. We can imagine possible worlds where racism is justified. (Consider the following case: in Tolkien's fiction, racism against orcs is justified because all orcs are in fact evil.) We have extremely good evidence that racism and fascism are wrong, but it seems overly triumphant to say that it is *impossible* that they could be correct. One reason we should not say that is that we know there are strong philosophical and empirical challenges to all major theories of justice and all conceptions of the good. We also have strong empirical evidence that most of us form our political views on the basis of flimsy evidence. We could very well be wrong about our most deeply held moral convictions. Thus, it seems we should not congratulate ourselves that these other positions could not possibly be true. We are not that secure in our moral knowledge.

Thus, the most plausible conclusion is that we should disqualify people whose views are sufficiently bad, regardless of whether they have high levels of epistemic justification, with perhaps a few special exceptions (like MI6 agent Kim above). But this brings us back to the original problem of determining what counts as *sufficiently bad*.

Epistemic Humility

A closely related variation on the previous proposal says that what qualifies or disqualifies someone is their epistemic humility. If a person is *open to change*, then perhaps they should not be blackballed, while if they are close-minded, perhaps they should.

There are some intuitively plausible cases that illustrate this. Imagine two people, Yvonne and Zed, who are deeply racist because they were both raised by racists and never encountered any anti-racist beliefs. However, suppose you know that Yvonne is open-minded, and Zed is closed-minded. Yvonne can be convinced to change while Zed cannot. Here, you might conclude that it is permissible to befriend Yvonne, but not Zed, because you expect Yvonne will change her racist beliefs under pressure.

However, I am not sure the open-minded/closed-minded distinction solves the problem. For one, what seems to be doing the work is not epistemic humility *per se*, but instead the expectation that Yvonne will change. To see why, imagine again that Yvonne in fact is open-minded. But suppose you can predict the future. Suppose you somehow know that despite her openness, due to bad luck, she will never actually change. Zed never changes because he is closed-minded, but Yvonne never changes because she never receives the

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right epistemic stimulus. Here, we might well conclude that Yvonne is better than Zed, but it still seems that we should not befriend her.

Beyond that, it is not clear that epistemic stubbornness versus humility is by itself the real issue. Imagine that Alistair obstinately believes that utilitarianism is the correct moral theory, but that in fact it is not. Suppose he is closed-minded. No evidence or counterarguments will ever convince him otherwise. Though Alistair's obstinacy is bad, it does not seem by itself sufficient reason to blackball him because his utilitarianism is not a sufficiently *bad* set of beliefs.

The original idea is that we must blackball people with sufficiently bad beliefs. Now, the current proposal seems to be that we must blackball people who are sufficiently closed-minded about sufficiently bad beliefs. But we still do not know, even roughly, what counts as sufficiently bad beliefs. That was the original puzzle. We have made little progress.

Value Differences but not Empirical Differences

Another candidate proposal is that we should disqualify people for having the wrong *values* but not for mistaken *empirical* beliefs. Indeed, calls for civic friendship and unity often push this line. People say that Republicans and Democrats both love America but disagree about which policies work best in promoting their shared values. However, this candidate theory also seems mistaken for the familiar reasons.

First, it cannot be that all value differences should disqualify people. If we accept slightly different versions of some moral theory, we have genuine value differences, but it seems absurd, even if I am right and you are wrong, for me to blackball you for a small mistake. So, the question remains *how much* of a departure from the right values disqualifies someone. Again, we have made no progress.

Second, it is implausible that empirical mistakes would never disqualify someone from friendship. Suppose our friend believes it is permissible to torture animals because he is convinced, after reading Descartes, that animals are zombie automatons incapable of feeling pain. He agrees that torture would be evil only if animals could feel. Or he advocates slavery because he becomes convinced, after reading Aristotle, that some people are natural slaves incapable of self-rule. Or he advocates racism because he believes scientific studies really do show that some races are much smarter and more

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conscientious than others.[2] Our dispute is empirical, but it is plausible he should be blackballed.

Magnitude of the Underlying Issue

One might instead claim that the magnitude of the underlying injustice, as experienced by people in the world, determines whether a belief is sufficiently beyond the pale that a person holding it should be blackballed. To illustrate, suppose Mike believes that the US, not Canada, has the rightful claim to the disputed Machias Seal Island. But suppose he is wrong; the truth is that it rightfully belongs to Canada. Suppose that Nigel believes that Russia rightfully controls Ukraine, but he, too, is wrong. Here, the candidate principle we are considering says that Nigel's beliefs in practice cause horrific suffering and war, but Mike's do not, so therefore Nigel ought to be blackballed but Mike should not. The principle says that because the belief 'Machias Seal Island belongs to Canada' is not causing a war, it is morally innocuous, while Nigel's belief is disqualifying because his beliefs are being used by actual people to justify atrocities.

Yet, once again, this candidate principle does not really solve the problem, because we now need to know how big the actual injustice must be before it disqualifies someone. If I believe X, while X corresponds to a real-life injustice, how bad must that injustice be to make me deserve to be blackballed? We have no answer. This is a new version of the 'bad enough' problem.

Further, as with many of the other candidate principles, the putative standard also falls apart under scrutiny. Consider, for instance, the question of reducing racism in the United States versus the question of opening borders worldwide. The economics literature on open borders overwhelmingly says that open borders would dramatically increase world product, would dramatically increase the welfare of the worst off while also improving the welfare of the better off, and would do far more to equalize and increase world incomes than

[2] Racism is almost by definition a normative view which is grounded on mistaken empirical views. It would be strange for someone to say, 'I believe East Asian and black people have generally the same distribution of IQ, conscientiousness, criminal disposition, and every other empirical measure which we might use to evaluate people, but I nevertheless think East Asian people are better'. Instead, racists nearly always believe some race is inferior on supposed empirical grounds.

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either internal or external redistribution (Weyl, 2018; Clemens, 2011). If this empirical work is correct, then the harms of closed borders are many orders of magnitude worse than, say, the injustice committed by the KKK throughout its entire history. If I had to choose between either opening borders or eliminating the KKK, I think opening borders is the clear and obvious choice. Yet, even as an open borders advocate myself, I am not inclined to exclude someone from friendship for advocating normal immigration restrictions, but I would dump a friend who joined the KKK.

Dehumanization and Denial of Rights

Let's consider another candidate principle. Many people say the issue is not merely that one advocates something unjust or wrong, but what matters is *what kind* of injustice we advocate. Many who advocate blackballing say that we should refuse to befriend people who hold 'dehumanizing' normative beliefs: beliefs which deny people's basic humanity, beliefs which deny their essential identities, or beliefs which deny them their rights. Many of my friends claim that voting for Trump means endorsing white supremacy. Roache claims that endorsing the UK's conservative party is equivalent to advocating dehumanizing racism, sexism, and homophobia. Some theorists claim that 'trans-exclusionary radical feminists' are ineligible for friendship because they deny people's identities and thus deny their dignity. Pro-lifers think pro-choice people deny the dignity and personhood of foetuses; pro-choice people think pro-lifers deny the dignity and rights of women. Some libertarians think all statists are authoritarians who reject others' rights.

In a way, everyone is correct to levy such accusations. After all, what exactly constitutes a person, which rights people ought to have, how strong those rights are, how valuable a person's life is, what constitutes dignity, what institutions are required by dignity, and so on, are precisely the questions normative and political philosophy asks and attempts to answer.

But this also means that any moral-political view other than my own will, in most cases, deny people rights I think they ought to have, deny some people agency and dignity I think they have, deny that people's rights are as strong as I think they are, deny that some people qualify as persons whom I think qualify, and so on. If my normative philosophy is correct, then every departure from my views involves some degree of dehumanization, denial of rights, downplaying of rights, reduction of dignity, and/or denial of identity.

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This example from Freiman and myself illustrates this point:

> [...] consider again the question of trying to determine what conditions are necessary and sufficient for sexual consent. Imagine, for simplicity's sake, these conditions fall on a one-dimensional scale from fully consensual on the left to horrifically nonconsensual on the right. Imagine the correct place to draw the divide is at point C. If you draw the line to right of C, then a moral critic might condemn you, saying you defending de re, if not de dicto, the permissibility of actions that in fact constitute rape. You might have a clever argument to the contrary, but in fact, the action you defend is a form of rape or sexual assault. [...] However, it goes the other way, too. If you draw the line to the left of C, then a critic might condemn your behavior as not merely mistaken but morally wrongful. After all, by calling a consensual case non-consensual, you thereby infantilize adults and deny their agency over their own bodies. (Brennan and Freiman, 2020, p. 194)

We argue that this problem arises for almost any normative dispute. As soon as you depart from the *correct answer*, you thereby advocate (*de re* if not *de dicto*) something that amounts to the denial of rights, dignity, or agency, or alternatively a denial of personal prerogative, autonomy, freedom, or some other value.

This new candidate principle, like the others, seemed plausible at first glance. However, the question once again becomes *how much* dehumanization, rights denial, and so on, disqualifies one from friendship and opens one to blackballing. The issue is not whether someone's mistaken beliefs dehumanize, deny dignity, reduce personhood, and so on – of course they do! – but whether they do so *too much*.

Maximal Blackballing?

Since all attempts to draw a line have failed, one may instead be tempted to adopt a maximalist or rigorist pro-blackballing position. Imagine someone says:

> Advocates of friendship between political disputants might say, 'I get that some views are beyond the pale, but surely *some* bad beliefs are OK'. But I worry that you're saying it's reasonable to advocate (*de re* if not *de dicto*) injustice and evil, as long as it's a sufficiently little bit. Precisely how much racism,

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dehumanization, or sincere endorsement of oppression, exploitation, and injustice should I tolerate from others? Do tell.

I find this argument uncompelling. Probably no one has the correct moral views on everything. Everyone has some mistaken moral beliefs, and thus everyone advocates *de re* things that are bad, unjust, immoral, and so on. The maximalist thus implies there should be no friendship, period. That seems absurd.

4. Objections to Normative Blackballing

Let's consider a different take: perhaps the attempts to draw the line all fail because there is no line; instead, no one should be blackballed from friendship for their normative beliefs. To that end, I will now consider various objections to normative blackballing. However, I will argue, these objections fail.

Problems of Application

One objection to normative blackballing holds that we should refrain from blackballing others because we are probably bad at applying the standards, whatever they are. After all, as we just saw, there is a genuine puzzle about which views disqualify people for friendship. It is difficult to assess where or how to draw the line.

In addition, empirical work indicates most of us are on our worst epistemic behaviour when we engage in politics. We tend to assume anyone who disagrees with us is stupid and evil. We are highly biased in how we process information. We tend to take extreme versions of shared views to impress our normative allies (Achen and Bartels, 2016; Kinder and Kalmoe, 2017; Mason, 2018).

Still, this objection does not seem to defeat all instances of blackballing. After all, it nevertheless seems plausible that we should not befriend Nazis, neo-Stalinists, KKK members, or defenders of slavery, even though we ourselves tend to be obnoxious jerks about politics. Mark might be a grandstanding, bloviating hack who calls everyone to his right a Nazi, but that does not imply he should therefore feel free to befriend actual Nazis. We might be terrible at applying the standards, but sometimes we have to apply them.

However, one might argue that just as friendship exposes us to moral risk, normative blackballing also exposes us to moral risk. Just as we can act wrongly by befriending the wrong people, we can act wrongly by failing to befriend the right people or by rejecting

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the wrong people. Sometimes people deserve our friendship. If we misapply the standards of normative blackballing, whatever they are, we may wrongly exclude people we should befriend or dump friends we should maintain.

These worries are reasonable, but they do not seem to be decisive grounds to reject blackballing, nor do they help us draw the line. 'I'm worried I might fail to befriend the right people, so I'll feel free to be friends with actual Nazis' seems absurd.

Further, the moral risks of friendship and non-friendship are asymmetrical. While we might sometimes owe people friendship, in general, we have tremendous personal prerogative in whom we befriend. We are not generally obligated to befriend specific people. But the obligation to avoid befriending the wrong people is closer to a perfect obligation.

What If I Am the One with Mistaken Beliefs?

Consider an issue closely related to the last. As philosophers, we can ask readers to imagine that someone has the correct moral and normative views, and then ask how much or what kinds of normative differences she should tolerate from friends. But in the real world, we cannot stipulate any person is correct. Indeed, most of us are overconfident in our own moral goodness (Epley and Dunning, 2001). Many of us believe bad things for bad reasons.

However, this kind of objection does not seem to defeat the case for blackballing, nor does it explain how to draw the line. Consider this objection: 'You might be wrong about democratic liberalism and the Nazi might be right. Indeed, empirical work on political psychology shows you probably only advocate democratic liberalism because you are a conformist. Your philosophy classes merely helped you rationalize an ideology you really believe for social reasons. So, you should feel free to befriend Nazis and KKK members'. This argument is unpersuasive, even though the psychological accusations are true of many people.

Self-Righteousness

One might object that normative blackballing is self-righteous. Self-righteous people engage in vicious and improper proclamations and displays of their moral superiority. Even if you are morally better

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than other people, you should not dwell on it, even in the privacy of your own mind (Driver, 2001).

However, again, this objection does not seem to defeat blackballing tout court. 'You should feel free to befriend literal Nazis because you should not be self-righteous' seems false. Instead, the upshot could be that we should refuse to befriend certain people, but we should not be self-righteous about it.

Does Blackballing Undermine Democracy?

Another objection to the practice of normative blackballing is that it might undermine democratic functioning or performance (Talisse, 2021). For instance, the US has tremendous political segregation. This reduces cross-cutting normative discussions, and probably exacerbates polarization and mutual distrust. In turn, this likely undermines the perceived legitimacy of the democratic system. Voters become convinced the other side always lies and cheats (Mutz, 2006).

Some of these worries can be reduced by advocating blackballing in friendship but not in other relations. Perhaps we should not befriend certain political disputants, but perhaps we should nevertheless live near them, work with them, and treat them congenially. We should sometimes engage others in democratic deliberation and, for the sake of democracy, treat their views with a respect they do not deserve.

Further, even if blackballing reduces democratic functioning, it is unclear this shows blackballing is wrong. Sometimes right actions have downsides. Something might be good for democracy but still wrong, or bad for democracy but still right.

Liberal Tolerance

Relatedly, liberals (like me) by definition believe that people ought to have extensive and strong rights of free speech, conscience, religion, and lifestyle. Many liberals, such as John Stuart Mill (and I), also believe that extensive social censorship is often undesirable; they think people should not generally be bullied, ostracized, cancelled, boycotted, and cajoled for their views. Mill argues that societies which engage in extensive social ostracism and boycotting impede moral, scientific, social, and political progress. Further, he argues that individual people learn faster and become more developed as

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moral agents when exposed to many points of view. He argues it is helpful for us to be exposed to bad actors as bad examples.

However, a Millian liberal might reply that even if liberal tolerance rules out radical blackballing from all domains, it might allow blackballing in friendship. For reasons of liberal tolerance, perhaps we should not fire known KKK members from most jobs or refuse to serve them at restaurants. But, the Millian might say, we should still not befriend them.

The Costs of Lost Friendship

We benefit from friendship, even (sometimes) from friendship with bad people. Rejecting potential friends or dumping current friends often involves serious losses. Is that a reason to reject blackballing?

In a review of the literature, Bennett Helm notes that each of the following have been advanced as individual and social justifications for friendship:

1. It is life-enhancing in a variety of ways.
2. We benefit from having others care for us and from caring for others.
3. Friendship has epistemic value; for instance, it helps us assess our own moral virtue.
4. Forming strong bonds with others might be constitutive or a necessary component of flourishing.
5. We form unions because of shared histories or shared values.
6. Friendship reduces our egoism and promotes general concern for others.
7. Friendship can help produce moral progress by causing us to have particular attachments to people with unconventional values or ideas. (Helm, 2017)

1-7 show friendship is valuable, but they do not show that we should reject blackballing tout court, nor do they help us draw the line. Sure, I would benefit from having others care for me and caring from others. But why pick Bob, a KKK member who thinks slavery was just, as a friend? Sure, friendship has epistemic value, but perhaps befriending Bob communicates bad things about me and also tends to lead me morally astray. Befriending Bob might make me a worse person. Sure, forming bonds with others is great, but there are plenty of people more worthy of such bonds than Bob. Friendship is valuable, but that does not mean blackballing is never justified.

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By analogy, a business might produce a valuable product but still deserve to be boycotted.

5. Conclusion

Intuitively, it seems like normative blackballing is sometimes justified. We should not befriend certain people. Intuitively, it also seems that rigorist or maximal blackballing is unjustifiable. We may befriend some people even though they have mistaken moral beliefs. So, there is a line to be drawn somewhere on some grounds. In this paper, I have argued that most of the candidates for drawing that line fail and fail for the same reasons: upon further inspection, either turn out to give the wrong kind of explanation, or they do not help us determine, even broadly, what counts as 'bad enough' beliefs. Examining the arguments for and objections to normative blackballing did not seem to help either. I hope, then, that my paper shows that there is a genuine puzzle about to what extent and on what grounds blackballing is justifiable – a puzzle which perhaps others can solve.

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