



JACOB SOULVIE
Cognitive Science

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF CIVIL DISCOURSE AND FREE SPEECH?

Open discourse is, and has always been, an engine of innovation and a matter of contention. There is no shortage of examples of societies that tried to self-ossify in response to new ideas, but the only conclusion that can be drawn from this is that the old guard cannot be sustained when presented with an influx of new ideas. There is a reason that the First Amendment is first; it is a paramount facet of our shared zeitgeist, and the foundation that allows our individual rights and responsibilities to be actualized. The following paragraphs will prove these two claims about public discourse.

Civil speech is best viewed as both a right and a responsibility for the involved citizen, or any person who wishes to contribute to the continued success of our general society. It is a right because the founders of this collective project were intelligent enough to recognize that the unrestricted dissemination of ideas necessarily creates exciting and prosperous societies, with Britain and France being their examples. This kind of speech is a responsibility because we are the inheritors of this tradition that is constantly being revitalized, which at

the very least obliges the individual to repay this debt back to the society. In practice this means that we have some duty to speak with honesty, respect, and insight, in order to elevate this ethos of rhetoric in the modest yet imperative ways that an individual can.

But in our society it is implicit that the individual is superordinate to any group classification, so how does civil discourse bear on that? I believe it's obvious from an empirical standpoint. Information, whether it be gossip, news, or a journal of medicine, matters more than anything else in determining how an individual thinks and acts. It is information that sways a person towards political ideologies, social customs, and benign practical decisions. As Carl Jung said, "People don't have ideas, ideas have people". This is why civil, informed discourse is such a moral imperative for the sovereignty of individuality; we are only capable of utilizing our astounding human faculties if we allow ourselves to be considerate, sensible, and realistic when we play with ideas.