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# Introduction

## Political Epistemology

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University of Bayreuth, Summer 2025

## 2 Today

1. Organisational Issues
2. Get to Know; Initial Brainstorming
3. Truth in Politics
4. Next Session: Epistemic Democracy

# Organisational Issues

## 4 Aims and Approach

- Epistemology: philosophical topics having to do with belief, justification, knowledge, expertise, disagreement, etc.
- One appealing idea in political epistemology: democracy is the best collective mechanism to find the truth
- At the same time, many mechanisms (e.g., on social media) obstruct or undermine the search for truth
- Our focus is on contemporary work in analytic philosophy

## 5 Seminar Structure

<b>29.04.</b>	1	Introduction / Truth in politics
<b>06.05.</b>	2	Epistemic democracy
<b>13.05.</b>	3	Epistemic democracy (cont.)
<b>20.05.</b>	4	Political ignorance
<b>27.05.</b>	5	Political ignorance (cont.)
<b>03.06.</b>	6	Political disagreement
<b>10.06.</b>		No course (Whit Tuesday)
<b>17.06.</b>	7	Political polarization
<b>24.06.</b>		No course (Wittgenstein Lectures)
<b>01.07.</b>	8	Expertise
<b>08.07.</b>	9	Deference
<b>15.07.</b>	10	Echo chambers
<b>22.07.</b>	11	Epistemic duties

## 6 Credit Points

- For 2 credit points, you must
  - ◇ read all **required literature** (on ELearning)
  - ◇ write eight **reading reflections** on the ELearning platform; format: ungraded, around 200 words each
  - ◇ (voluntary) write a **session summary**; format: ungraded, around 2 pages, counts as three reading reflections
- For 5 or 6 credit points, you must *in addition*
  - ◇ give a **presentation** with a **short essay** (around 1,500 words); graded
  - ◇ OR write a **long essay** (around 3,000 words); graded

# Warming Up

## 8 Initial Questions

- Do I have any expectations or wishes for this seminar?
- What topics within political epistemology interest me?
- When I hear ‘democracy and truth’, what is my first reaction?



# Truth in Politics

Landemore, 'Political Cognitivism: A Defense'

# 10 Political Cognitivism

For an epistemic defence of democracy, we need to presume

- **Political Cognitivism**. (i) At least for some political questions, there are correct answers, and (ii) these answers can be approximated to some degree. (208)

Political cognitivism is opposed to:

- **Political Non-Cognitivism** (denies (i)). There are no correct answers to political questions. (E.g., politics is merely about voicing one's personal preferences.)
- **Political Scepticism** (denies (ii)). Political questions cannot be known with any degree of certainty, even a low one.

Q1. Does political cognitivism seem intuitively obvious or objectionable? Why?

# 11 Varieties of Political Cognitivism (217-8)

- **Culturalist Political Cognitivism.** At least for some political questions, there are correct answers, where correctness is determined relative to one's culture.
- **Absolutist Political Cognitivism.** At least for some political questions, there are correct answers, where correctness is determined relative to one's culture.
  - ◇ **Weak Political Cognitivism.** An answer is correct if it avoids major harm. (Estlund: 'war, famine, economic collapse, political collapse, epidemic, genocide')
  - ◇ **Strong Political Cognitivism.** An answer is correct if it aligns with some demanding standard of moral correctness (e.g., utilitarianism, distributive justice, economic efficiency).

Q2. In which sense can answers be 'correct' if they depend on our culture?

Q3. Why is weak PC 'weak' and strong PC 'strong'? Can the difference between the two be upheld?

## 12 'Hybrid' Political Cognitivism

Landemore advocates a **hybrid** between culturalist and absolutist political cognitivism:

'I believe that democracy is good at producing the right kind of outcomes, where the "right kind of outcomes" is defined in part in relation to a shared set of public values that cannot claim universal but merely local validity (e.g., a certain view of the hierarchy between equality and freedom) but in part, also, with a smaller core of values that have universal validity (e.g., the ideal of human rights and a number of basic freedoms).' (219)

# 13 Facts and Values

Landemore distinguishes three components of political questions:

- **Factual claims**

- ◇ ‘did Iraq have WMDs?’
- ◇ ‘what happens if the interest rate gets raised?’

- **Basic (fact-insensitive) normative claims**

- ◇ ‘human life should be preserved’
- ◇ ‘the few should not be sacrificed for the many’

- **Fact-sensitive normative claims**

- ◇ ‘we should raise the minimum wage (because doing so will benefit the poor)’
- ◇ ‘we should impose tariffs (because doing so will promote domestic industry)’

Q4. Is the distinction clear?

# 14 Types of Political Debates

- Some political debates are primarily about **facts**
  - ◇ E.g., ‘has the introduction of the Euro helped the German economy’; maybe we agree on what ‘help the German economy’ means, but we disagree about the facts
- Some political debates are primarily about **basic values**
  - ◇ E.g., all the facts about birth and pregnancy are mostly agreed-upon; the debate over abortion is primarily over the moral status of the foetus
- Most political debates are probably about a **mix of facts and basic values**
  - ◇ We might often disagree over fact-sensitive normative principles, but not have the time to resolve the underlying empirical disagreements
  - ◇ In practice, perception of facts and basic values are often intertwined

Q5. What if one is a cognitivist about facts and a non-cognitivist about basic values?

# 15 The Anti-Authoritarian Objection

1. Democracy is characterised by (and valuable because of) open debate, mutual tolerance, and reversible political choices.
2. Invoking truth in political discussion closes debate, leads to intolerance of others, and entails making irreversible political choices.
3. **Conflict:** One cannot value democracy and invoke truth at the same time.

Q6. Is this a convincing argument? How could one reject it?

Q7. What other objections might there be to truth in politics?



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# Epistemic Democracy

## Political Epistemology

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## 2 Today

1. Proceduralism and Instrumentalism
2. Epistemic Democracy
3. Next Week

# Proceduralism and Instrumentalism

## 4 Intrinsic and Instrumental Value

- Democracy can have **instrumental** value
- Democracy can have **intrinsic** value

Something can have **both** instrumental and intrinsic value. It is uncontroversial that democracy has **some** instrumental value. There are three interesting questions:

1. **Does** democracy have intrinsic value?
2. What does that intrinsic value **consist in**/what is it based on?
3. **How much** intrinsic value does democracy have—i.e., how is the intrinsic value to be weighed against instrumental values?

## 5 A Small-Scale Example

- For this seminar, we wish to argue a day trip
- There are two broad ways how the day trip could be decided
  - ◇ **Autocracy.** The (benevolent) professor decides
  - ◇ **Democracy.** The class decides together, via democratic vote

Q1. What could the intrinsic and instrumental values of deciding democratically be?

Q2. Do these values translate to large-scale democracy? Does large-scale democracy have other intrinsic or instrumental values?

## 6 Classifying Views

No-Value Views	Positive-Value Views			
	Democracy has <b>some</b> intrinsic value			
Democracy has <b>no</b> intrinsic value	Non-Proceduralism Democracy has <b>intrinsic</b> but <b>not primary</b> value.		Proceduralism Democracy has <b>intrinsic</b> and <b>primary</b> value.	
Pure instrumentalism Democracy has no intrinsic value	Impure instrumentalism Democracy has intrinsic but secondary value	Balancing views Democracy has intrinsic value, of (roughly) equal weight to other values	Impure proceduralism Democracy possesses intrinsic, and normally decisive, value	Pure proceduralism Democracy possesses intrinsic and decisive value

# Epistemic Democracy

## 8 Overview: Landemore, 'Democratic Reason'

- **Thesis:** Democracy is epistemically superior to oligarchy, *even if* we can identify the brightest people in advance
- **Argument:** Bigger groups, even if they have lower average cognitive accuracy, have greater cognitive diversity. Groups which combine their cognitive diversity through deliberation achieve greater collective accuracy
- **Model:** Landemore rejects the Condorcet Jury Theorem (CJT) and the 'Miracle of Aggregation' models; instead, she relies on a theorem from Hong and Page (2004)

Q3. What are your general impressions of Landemore's account?

## 9 Details of Landemore's Argument

- Landemore argues for the beneficial effects of deliberation (257)
  - ◇ it enlarges the 'pool' of ideas and information;
  - ◇ it 'weeds out' the good arguments from the bad
  - ◇ leads to consensus
- Landemore argues that democratic assemblies illustrate the benefits of deliberation and cognitive diversity on a small scale (262-4)
- The second mechanism which makes democracy superior is majority rule with universal suffrage (264-272)

Q4. Do democratic assemblies really exhibit the required virtues of deliberation and cognitive diversity?

Q5. If democratic assemblies exhibit them, why do we still need universal suffrage?



# 10 Questions

- The idealised nature of Landemore's argument (Josefine)
- Does this apply in reality? (Janne)
  - ◇ Is the analogy to Jury deliberation realistic? (Teresa)
  - ◇ Is deliberation really good? (Miriam)
- What about representatives? Are they really cognitively diverse? (Jan)
- Competence and deliberation / doubts about deliberation (Charlotte)
  - ◇ Example: Brexit (Charlotte, Janne); Trump (Janne); populism (Paula)
- Does Landemore overfocus on truth? (Teresa)
- Are experts really better? Can we trust experts? (Julius)
- Principle of independence (Julia)
- Questions about how the cognitive diversity model works (Finn)



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# Epistemic Democracy (II)

## Political Epistemology

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## 2 Today

- Organisational Issues
- Models of Epistemic Democracy
- Müller on knowledge exploitation
- Müller on experimental vs. polycentric democracy
- Next Week

# Models of Epistemic Democracy

# 6 Three Models

## Condorcet Jury Theorem

If individuals voters have independent probabilities of being right only slightly larger than 0.5, then a group of such voters has a very large probability of being right.

- ◇ The independence assumption looks questionable
- ◇ If  $p > .5$ , then in large democracies right results are almost certain
- ◇ The result cuts both ways: if  $p < .5$ , wrong results are almost certain

## 'Miracle of Aggregation'

In large groups which have to independently estimate a result, the median guess tends to be close to the correct guess (because wrong guesses act like 'white noise')

- ◇ The independence assumption looks questionable
- ◇ Threatened by systematic bias in individual opinions
- ◇ Lacks a clear explanation of 'why'

## Hong/Page Theorem

A larger group with more cognitive diversity but lower average accuracy outperforms a smaller group with less cognitive diversity but higher average accuracy.

- ◇ Highly mathematical, counterintuitive definition of 'diversity'
- ◇ Lacks a clear explanation of 'why'

## 7 Discussion

- Are any of the three models adequate to the realities of democracy?
- What is the role of abstract models in thinking about the epistemic benefits of democracy?

# Müller on Knowledge Exploitation

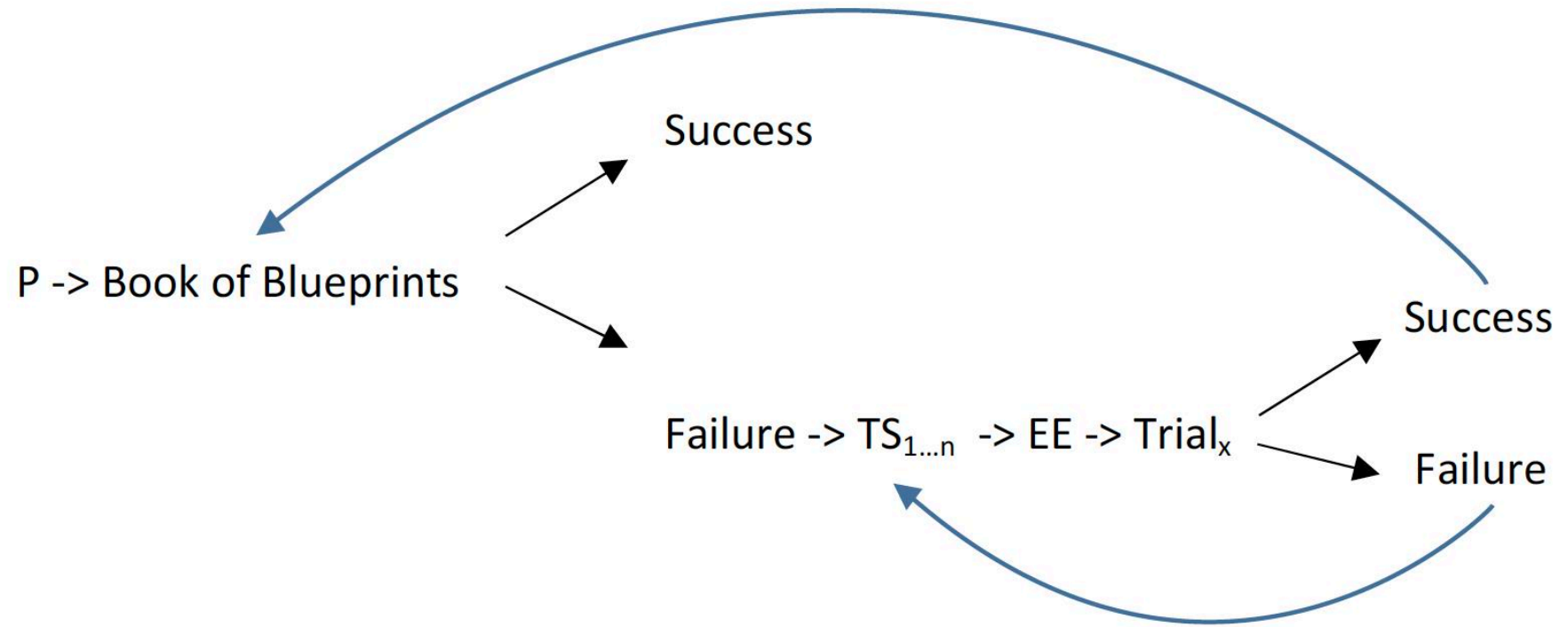
## 9 Müller, 'Beyond Knowledge Exploitation'

Müller claims that his article has three aims:

1. reject the preoccupation with knowledge exploitation
2. clarify what is meant by 'knowledge'
3. polycentric democracy has a claim to be the best conceivable political architecture



# 10 Problem-solving Process



**Fig. 1** Open social problem-solving process

# 11 'Book of blueprints'

- The 'book of blueprints' is a set of known solutions or strategies for solving social problems
  - ◇ A 'thicker' book of blueprints corresponds with a greater problem-solving capacity
  - ◇ Müller: the main way to add to the book is through 'social experimentation' (1278)
  - ◇ **Social engineering knowledge** is the ability to create new blueprints (1279)

# 12 Müller's Four Stages

- **Stage 1:** Identifying a social problem
  - ◇ It is an intersubjective issue what counts as a social problem
  - ◇ Identifying social problems requires **moral knowledge** and 'knowledge about social causes and effects' (1279)
- **Stage 2:** Production of tentative solutions
  - ◇ Müller emphasises that this is a creative process; it is about a **lack of** knowledge (1281)
  - ◇ Democracy plays a central role in this stage
- **Stage 3:** Error elimination
  - ◇ Scientific theories have a central role in this stage, as they proscribe inappropriate solutions
- **Stage 4:** Evaluation
  - ◇ We decide on, implement, and evaluate a tentative solution
  - ◇ Similar to first stage, relying on **moral knowledge** and cause-effect knowledge

## 13 (Original) Questions for Discussion

- Does Müller's position help with potential shortcomings of Landemore's position? Does it improve the argument for epistemic democracy?
- Does Müller's account of 'problem-solving' help us in understanding politics?
- What is 'polycentric' democracy, and why does Müller think it is superior? What would 'polycentric' democracy look like in practice?
- In general, how could one modify or improve the defence of epistemic democracy?

# Müller on experimental vs. polycentric democracy

# 15 Definitions

- “The **experimental account of democracy** maintains that the appropriate means of dealing with social knowledge problems is straightforward piecemeal engineering in the vein of Popper and Dewey.” (1283-4)
- “We can define **polycentric democracy** as an institutional arrangement involving a multiplicity of polities acting independently, but under the constraints of a democratically supervised framework for institutional competition.” (1284)

What does this mean in practice? Why would polycentric democracy perform better?



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# Political Ignorance

## Political Epistemology

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## 2 Today

- Empirical Evidence & Epistemic Democracy
- Rational Ignorance
- Political Bias and Tribalism
- Epistocracy
- Next Week



# Empirical Evidence and Epistemic Democracy

## 4 Discussion

- A. What would be required to count as competent/knowledgeable about politics?
- B. What is the empirical evidence concerning voter ignorance? How is ignorance commonly measured in this literature?
- C. Putting A and B together, does the empirical evidence measure the right thing? Does it overestimate or underestimate voter competence?
- D. How do empirical results about voter ignorance affect
  - 1. The Condorcet Jury Theorem?
  - 2. The Miracle of Aggregation?
  - 3. Landemore's emphasis on deliberation and epistemic diversity?
  - 4. Müller's account of polycentric democracy?

# Rational Ignorance

## 6 Rational Ignorance

**Analogy 1.** You are about to cross the street. Should you gather information? Yes—not gaining information has high costs/risks, and gaining information has low costs

**Analogy 2.** Information about where to find 1 million dollars is hidden in a book in the Harvard Library System (which has 17 million books). Should you gather information? No—the cost of gaining information far outweighs the expected benefits

## 7 Rational Ignorance

P1 Your vote does not make a difference, or only has a tiny statistical chance of making a difference

Thus,

C1 Gaining no information about politics, or gaining information irrationally, is not costly

P2 Gaining information about politics is costly (e.g. time-intensive, loses friends)

P3 It is rational to engage in the activity with higher expected benefits

Thus,

C2 It is irrational to gain information about politics, and rational not to gain information about politics or to gain information irrationally

# Political Bias and Tribalism

## 9 Systematic Bias

1. Low-information voting would not matter if there was no systematic differences in opinion between high-information and low-information voters  
Example: in the Miracle of Aggregation, ignorance does not matter as long as it is evenly distributed around the right answer
2. However, there are systematic differences in opinion between high-information and low-information voters  
E.g., high-information voters tend to be more accepting of free trade, minority rights, abortion rights, and more critical of legal paternalism, military intervention, etc.
3. Political psychology tells us that we are subject to a variety of systematic biases

# 10 Identity before Reason

- **Rational Theory of Voting:** People identify with/vote for a political party on the basis of which party aligns with their (prior) opinions
- **Identity Theory of Voting:** People hold their political opinions on the basis of what the party they identify with advocates

For the majority of voters, it seems that the Identity Theory is more empirically accurate than the Rational Theory ('tribal voting')

**Supporting Evidence.** The 'clustering' of political issues that should be logically independent

**Analogy.** Sports is tribal. People are motivated by their allegiances and this motivates them to participate. People seek out and process information selectively ('no way this was a red card')



# 11 Discussion

- If politics is tribal, how does this affect the value of democracy?
- What type of political institutions could help combat tribalism?

# Epistocracy

# 13 The Right to a Competent Electorate

**Analogy 1.** Imagine a doctor operates on you. You have a right that your doctor is competent.

**Analogy 2.** Imagine a group of doctors operates on you who decide by majority rule. You have a right that only competent doctors participate

**General Argument.**

1. The right to vote gives you power over others
2. You can only have a right to exercise power over others if you are competent in exercising that power
3. You can only have a right to vote if you are competent in politics

## 14 Discussion

- What would epistocracy look like in practice? What different institutional forms might there be?
- Why would one think that epistocracy is superior to democracy?



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# Political Ignorance (II)

## Political Epistemology

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## 2 Today

- Organisational Issues
- Bagg's Critique
- Minimalist Democracy
- Discussion
- Next Week

# Bagg's Critique

## 6 Four Models

- Intrinsic Defence of Democracy: democracy is desirable because it is intrinsically better than alternatives
- Epistemic Defence of Democracy: democracy is desirable because it is epistemically better than alternatives (Estlund, Landemore)
- Epistocracy: epistocracy is desirable because it is instrumentally better than alternatives (Bell, Brennan)
- Limited Government: because democracy cannot be made to work reliably, we should limit the extent of democracy (Somin)

Bagg is dissatisfied with all four models; he wishes to offer an alternative defence of democracy on pragmatic ('realist') grounds



## 7 Bagg's Critique of Alternative Models

- **Intrinsic Defence of Democracy:** democracy is desirable because it is intrinsically better than alternatives  
Bagg thinks that intrinsic defences are not tenable and philosophically controversial
- **Epistemic Defence of Democracy:** democracy is desirable because it is epistemically better than alternatives  
Bagg thinks that the empirical evidence from voter ignorance disproves this defence, and that the abstract models epistemic defenders invoke are unconvincing

## 8 Bagg's Critique of Alternative Models

- **Epistocracy:** epistocracy is desirable because it is instrumentally better than alternatives
  - Against Bell's meritocratic "China Model", Bagg objects that elites without being incentivised by electoral competition will 'capture' the state
  - Against Brennan's restricted franchise proposal, Bagg objects that parties would rig the electorate in their favour; moreover, enfranchised voters will vote in their own interests
- **Limited Government:** because democracy cannot be made to work reliably, we should limit the extent of democracy
  - Bagg objects that even a minimal state fulfils many functions, and that limiting government does not diminish the dangers of state capture and 'elite entrenchment' by private interests

## 9 Brennan: The Right to a Competent Electorate

**Analogy 1.** Imagine a doctor operates on you. You have a right that your doctor is competent.

**Analogy 2.** Imagine a group of doctors operates on you who decide by majority rule. You have a right that only competent doctors participate

### General Argument

1. The right to vote gives you power over others
2. You can only have a right to exercise power over others if you are competent in exercising that power
3. You can only have a right to vote if you are competent in politics

## 10 Discussion

- What would epistocracy look like in practice? What different institutional forms might there be?
- Why would one think that epistocracy is superior to democracy?

# Minimalist Democracy

## 12 Questions

- What does Bagg's alternative model look like? Why does he favour democracy?
- What real-world implications would implementing Bagg's model have?
- What are the biggest objections that Bagg's alternative faces?

# Discussion

# 14 Discussion

## — Groups

- ◇ Epistemic Defence of Democracy (Landemore)
- ◇ Minimalist Defence of Democracy (Bagg)
- ◇ Epistocracy (Brennan)

## — Tasks

- ◇ Find the strongest argument in favour of your position and prepare a brief description of these
- ◇ Find the strongest arguments against the alternative proposals and prepare a brief description of these
- ◇ Anticipate what other groups might claim the biggest weakness of your position might be and prepare a brief response





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# Political Disagreement

## Political Epistemology

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## 2 Today

- Peer Disagreement in Epistemology
- Francesco's Presentation
- Political Liberalism
- From Epistemology to Political Liberalism
- Next Week

# Peer Disagreement in Epistemology

## 4 Basic Question

How should we rationally adjust our beliefs if an epistemic peer possesses a different belief?

- Should ... rationally: normative question
- beliefs: subjectively held to be true
  - ◇ Tertiary Scheme: belief that p / belief that not-p / suspend belief
  - ◇ Degrees of Credence: belief that p with confidence 0.6
- peers: roughly: whoever has the same information and rational capacities as me

## 5 'Pure' Scheme

- At  $t_0$ :  $A$  has no opinion about  $p$ , but believes that  $A$  and  $B$  are epistemic peers concerning  $p$
- At  $t_1$ :  $A$  gains evidence  $E$  concerning  $p$ , and knows that  $B$  gains the same evidence  $E$  (and no additional evidence)
- At  $t_2$ :  $A$  forms the belief that  $p$  on the basis of  $E$  (or: believes that  $p$  with credence  $x$ )
- At  $t_3$ :  $A$  learns that  $B$  believes that not  $p$  (or: that  $B$  believes that  $p$  with a higher or lower credence than  $x$ )

Should  $A$  adjust his belief in  $B$ , or his level of credence in  $p$ ?

(The situation is the same from the point of view of  $B$ .)

## 6 Relevance

Objection: (1) it is difficult in practice to identify peers, or (2) we are never peers in reality.

One answer: method of isolation (similar to modelling in economics)

We want to know whether the *mere* fact that other people disagree with us matters; for that, we need to isolate mere disagreement from other factors

## 7 Three Theories

- **Equal Weight View.** I should give the opinion of epistemic peers and my own opinion equal weight (*ceteris paribus*)
  - ◇ E.g., if I believe that *p*, and my peer believes that not-*p*, then I should suspend belief concerning *p*
  - ◇ E.g., if I believe that *p* with credence 0.9, and my peer with credence 0.7, then I should adjust my credence to be 0.8
- **Extra Weight View/Conciliatory View.** I should give the opinion of epistemic peers some weight, but less weight than my own view (*ceteris paribus*)
  - ◇ E.g., if I believe that *p* with credence 0.9, and my peer with credence 0.7, then I should adjust my credence downwards, but not as low as 0.8
- **Steadfast View.** I should give the opinion of epistemic peers no weight (*ceteris paribus*)
  - ◇ E.g., if I believe that *p*, and my peer believes that not-*p*, then I should continue believing that *p*

## 8 Discussion

- What speaks for and against the three theories?
- What would these theories mean if applied to political beliefs?



## 9 The Opacity View

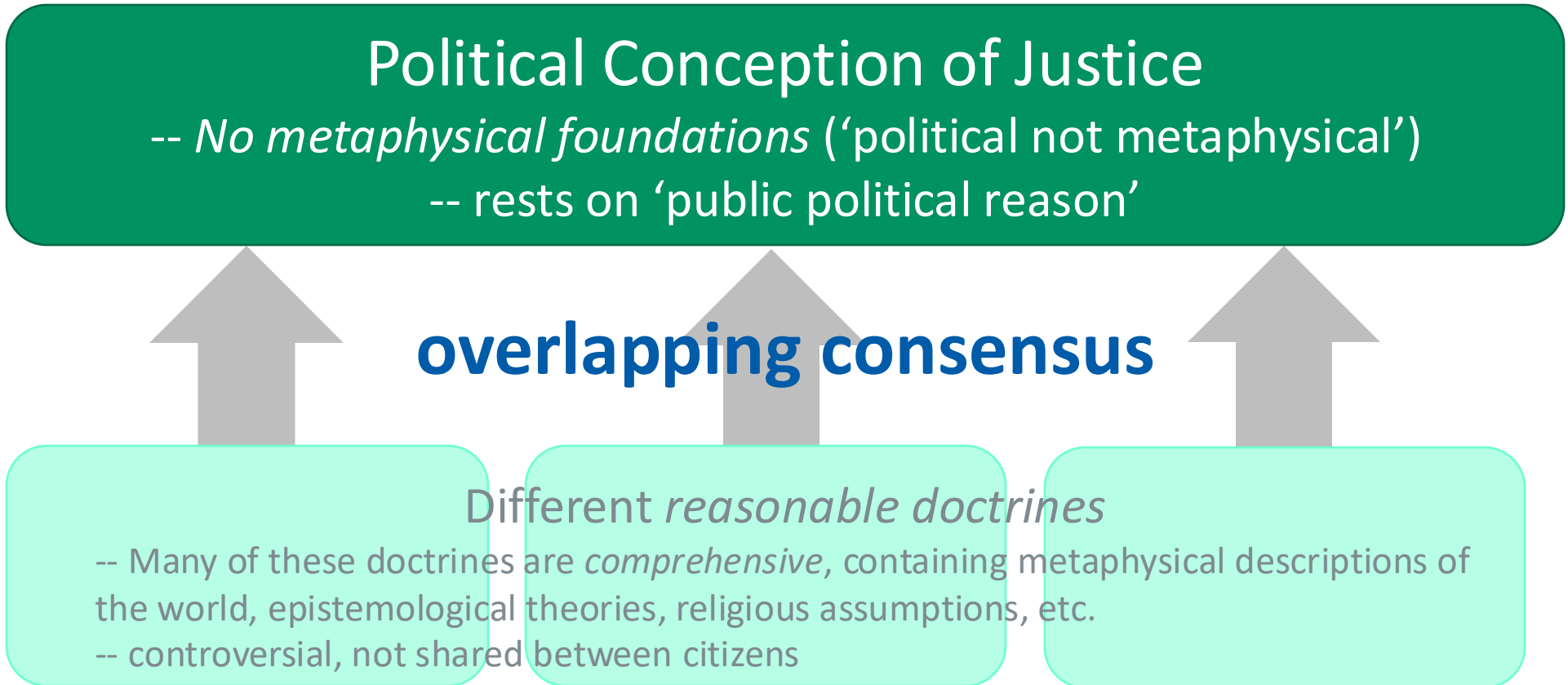
- Peter: Individuals do not merely have beliefs and evidence
  - ◇ There might also be evidence that **cannot be shared**
  - ◇ There might be forms of belief formation that **cannot be shared**
- This adds two further sources of reasonable disagreement
- Peter: the Opacity View is a ‘middle ground’ between the EWW and the SV
  - ◇ If we have shared evidence, then I should remain steadfast
  - ◇ But if we have non-shared or non-shareable evidence, then I should adjust my beliefs

# Political Liberalism

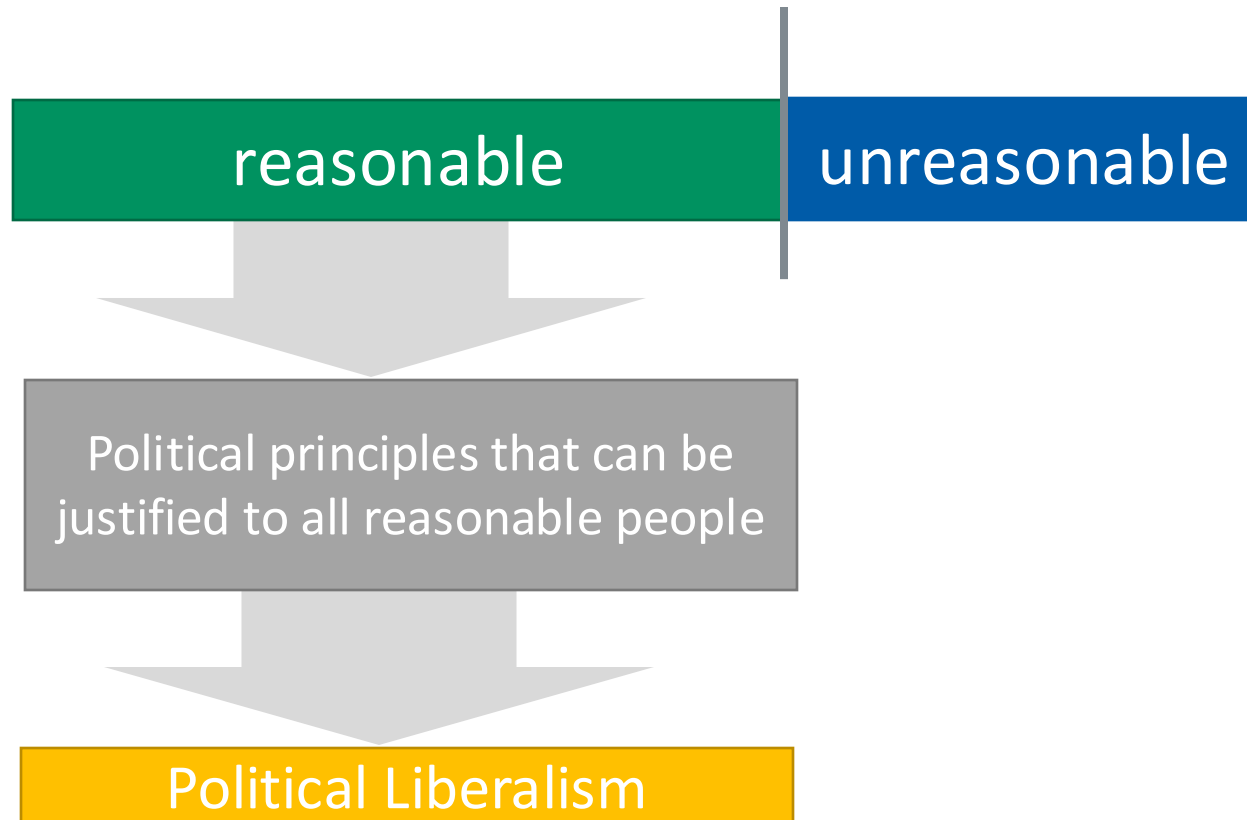
# 11 Background

- In *A Theory of Justice* (1971), Rawls defends two principles of justice on the basis of a complex moral argument; claim: a society which implements these principles will be stable
- In the mid-80s: Rawls starts to doubt whether his principles of justice guarantee stability; maybe he underestimated political disagreement/pluralism?
  - ◇ Maybe Rawls' political principles of justice are metaphysically correct, but can people accept them?
- Broad answer: we need a 'political conception' of justice that is not based on controversial metaphysical assumptions

## 12 A Political Conception of Justice



# 13 Problems with Reasonableness



*The political liberal needs to draw a line between reasonable and unreasonable people. Can this be done convincingly?*

Desiderata for drawing the line

1. **Inclusive:** most people should be classified as reasonable
2. **Non-empty:** there should be principles every reasonable person can accept
3. **Liberal:** the principles just be able to justify liberalism

# From Epistemology to Political Liberalism

# 15 Reconstructing Peter's Argument

1. Reasonable disagreement about moral and religious truths is possible
  - a) Our evidence concerning fundamental moral and religious truth is not shareable (615); nor is the method how we access these truths (616)
  - b) Thus, the Opacity View entails that we should reduce our credence in those truths (617)
2. If such reasonable disagreement is possible, then public justification of political institutions is necessary for legitimacy
  - a) Legitimacy requires that everyone have sufficient reason to accept one's political institutions (618)
  - b) I cannot have sufficient reason to accept political institutions if I should reduce my credence in those reasons
  - c) Thus, I cannot have sufficient reason to accept political institutions if they are based on moral and religious truths
3. Thus, public justification of political institutions is necessary for legitimacy

## 16 Peter's Example

... there is a reasonable disagreement with regard to a claim  $p$ , for example 'a responsible leader follows God's will.' ... If the Opacity View is correct, the disagreement arises because of difficulties they have to access and share evidence for the claim in question. This gives each of them reason to diminish confidence in their beliefs and to acknowledge the possibility that the belief of the other party might be correct. If there is such a reasonable disagreement, neither  $p$  nor not- $p$  can be used in the justification of political institutions. If  $p$  is used, the party that justifiably believes not- $p$  will not regard the institution as justified. If not- $p$  is used, the opposite occurs. So if there is a reasonable disagreement about whether or not 'a responsible leader follows God's will,' then attempts to justify the expansion of the political authority of the executive branch of government based on that controversial claim will fail. (618)





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# Political Polarization

## Political Epistemology

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## 2 Today

- Remaining Topics
- Jan's Presentation
- Nguyen on Polarization and Propaganda
- Joshi on Partisanship and Disagreement
- Next Week

# Nguyen on Polarization and Propaganda

## 5 Two Stories

- **The Polarization Story.** Our society has become (symmetrically) more polarized. The solution is greater social intermingling, mutual understanding, etc.
  - ◇ People sort into enclaves, amplified by technology, which leads to ‘belief polarization’
  - ◇ Talisse: too many areas of everyday life have become politicized; we need to find ways to connect to each other in non-political ways
- **The Propaganda Story.** Our society has been misled by intentionally false or manipulative information. The solution is regulating the flow of information.
  - ◇ Biased news outlets get a ‘propaganda feedback loop’ started, where the aim of communication stops being truth
  - ◇ This story did *not* happen symmetrically, but primarily on the right (Fox News, Breitbart)

## 6 Doubts about the Polarization Story

- Belief polarization vs political polarization
- Belief polarization is an irrational process where people merely become more extreme because they are in a group
- But there are different ways to explain the observation of ‘confident enclaves’
  - ◇ A community might just be appropriately sensitive to the evidence—e.g., the scientific community
  - ◇ People might return to the right level of confidence by interacting with each other
  - ◇ The truth might have a bias: there is no reason to think it lies in the middle

## 7 Which story comes first?

- Polarization First
  - ◇ Because our societies have become polarized and less intertwined on a personal level, propaganda can become effective
- Propaganda First
  - ◇ Because we have been manipulated into thinking of certain activities along political lines, we start sorting into groups and polarizing in our beliefs

## 8 Discussion

- What is the difference between a “confidence enclave” and irrational belief polarization?
- What is the “propaganda feedback loop”?
- Is it true that “safe spaces” can increase in-group epistemic rationality?
- What is the problem with debunking arguments? Why are they “cheap”?

# Joshi on Partisanship and Disagreement



## 10 Joshi's Core Argument

1. Different political questions are orthogonal to each other—i.e., which position one takes on one question is logically independent from other positions
2. However, orthogonal political opinions tend to cluster together
3. There is no good explanation why political opponents should be wrong not only on a *few* topics, but on *all* clustered issues

The opposing side would not only need to be *unreliable*, but *anti-reliable*

4. Thus, if you are partisan, it is unlikely that all your political opinions are right.  
You should reduce confidence in the opinions of your ideological camp

Joshi argues that this is both different from, and stronger than, the problem of peer disagreement.

# 11 Possible Ways to Explain the Asymmetry

- **Cognitive Inferiority.** Claims that one side is more biased or less intelligent don't hold up empirically.
- **Distrust in Expertise.** Conservative scepticism towards certain experts (e.g., climate scientists) doesn't generalize across domains. Also, liberals can be credulous about pseudoscience (e.g., astrology).
- **Psychological Differences.** While there are differences (e.g., conservatives may have higher negativity bias), these don't imply anti-reliability.

## 12 Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt)

- Maybe there is a general difference between liberals and conservatives which can explain why one side generally gets things right?
- Haidt: there are five moral dimensions
  - ◇ Care/harm
  - ◇ Fairness/cheating
  - ◇ Loyalty/betrayal
  - ◇ Authority/subversion
  - ◇ Sanctity/degradation
- Liberals are sensitive to the first two dimensions, conservatives to all five
- Maybe some of these dimensions are sources of moral error (or moral insight)?

# 13 Discussion

- How applicable is Joshi's view to real-world disagreements?
- How could we embed structural causes into Joshi's account?
- Could one still insist, in light of Joshi's argument, that one's own side is right?  
How might one argue this case?
- What is the connection, or lack of connection, of Joshi's argument to the debate about peer disagreement?
- Would Joshi's argument align with Peter's argument in favour of political liberalism?
- What is the connection between Joshi's argument and the empirical observations concerning political incompetence?

## 14 Nguyen vs Joshi

- Nguyen criticises Talisse's story for a comforting but empirically false symmetry: both sides are equally to blame
- Nguyen: an assumption of symmetry naturally seems to push us towards the political centre; but there is no reason to think this true
- On the other hand, from a first-person perspective, Joshi claims that partisans have symmetrical reasons to reduce confidence in their beliefs
- Nguyen thinks that in some circumstances, in-group polarization can be rational; Joshi thinks that it is normally evidence of irrationality



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# Expertise

## Political Epistemology

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## 2 Today

- The Problem with Expertise
- Josefine's Presentation
- Discussion
- Next Week

# Anderson on Expertise



# 6 The Problem with Expertise

## **The Individual Problem.**

- On difficult subjects, I cannot assess the evidence directly myself
- So I need to rely on experts. But how can I identify reliable experts?
- And how far should I trust experts? To what degree should I believe them ‘blindly’?

## **The Institutional Problem.**

- How can society create sufficient expertise on important subjects, while ensuring epistemic progress?
- How can society make sure that this expertise is made public, is identifiable, and is trusted?

## 7 Anderson: Three Criteria

- Anderson claims that we need to assess three dimensions to know whether we can trust someone's testimony,
  - ◇ Expertise
  - ◇ Honesty
  - ◇ Epistemic Responsibility
- How might we practically assess the three categories?
  - ◇ Expertise: educational credentials, awards, etc.
  - ◇ Honesty: conflicts of interest, instances of dishonesty, etc.
  - ◇ Epistemic Responsibility: “evasion of peer review”, associating with “crackpots”, “dialogic irrationality”, etc.
- Laypersons must also be able to identify whether there is a scientific consensus on a question
  - ◇ Sources of evidence: surveys, public statements, testimony from leaders

## 8 Problems in Practice

- Anderson's proposal requires people to **actively** and **impartially** seek out information; passively consuming media is not enough
- Obstacles
  - ◇ Misleading claims in media (but also 'false balance' reporting in respectable media)
  - ◇ Segregation of public opinion
  - ◇ Cultural cognition: people are more likely to believe claims that are in line with their social and moral ideals

## 9 The Democratic Response

Dewey: “the cure for the ailments of democracy is more democracy”

- A response to **cultural cognition**: find policies that appeal to multiple groups, e.g. nuclear power
- A response to **partisan segregation**: altered social media environment, face-to-face deliberation, speakers from diverse backgrounds, “nonpartisan integrative redistricting” (in the US)
- A response to **misleading media reporting**: revise norms of media reporting

# Discussion

## 12 Discussion

- Is Anderson correct in claiming that expert consensus is easy to find?
- How does the replication crisis in the natural sciences play into Anderson's view?
- If finding the right experts is so easy, why is there widespread distrust in experts?
- Are Anderson's proposed solutions overly optimistic or utopian?
- What would the theory of rational irrationality respond to Anderson?
- What can experts do to increase trust and make their opinions more available? Are (academic) experts themselves partially to blame?
- Does trust in experts rely on wider social trust? If so, what follows for how we should tackle lack of trust in experts?
- Anderson's examples mostly pertain to using the internet, and specifically Googling and using Wikipedia. Does her assessment change with respect to AI?

# 13 The Blame Argument

There's a tendency in public debate to blame social media and various social and political developments. But what about individual responsibility? We might argue:

1. It is relatively easy to gain reliable information about difficult subject matters (Anderson); it is also easy to abstain from having an opinion.
2. If something is easy to do, then failing to do it is blameworthy.
3. Many people fail to gain reliable information and have strong political opinions anyways.
4. Many people are blameworthy for having their political opinions.

NB. This is **not** Anderson's argument.



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# Deference

## Political Epistemology

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## 4 Today

- Miriam's Presentation
- Deference and Critical Thinking
- Etienne's Presentation
- Rini on Fake News and Partisan Epistemology
- Next Week

# Deference and Critical Thinking

## 7 Moral Deference

**VEGETARIANISM.** Aaron has never seriously thought about the moral status of animals. Aaron knows that Birke is very reliable on moral questions. There is no difference between them with respect to non-moral information surrounding the relevant issues—both are equally well-informed about (say) the meat industry and the conditions of factory animals. Aaron asks Birke whether it is permissible to eat meat; Birke tells him that it is not. On this basis alone, Aaron stops eating meat.

Is there anything wrong with Aaron becoming a vegetarian merely because he believes Birke? If so, why?

## 8 Defining Deference

**PESSIMISM about moral deference.** In most cases, if one acts on the basis of beliefs concerning a moral subject matter, where these beliefs are only sustained on the basis of deference to someone else, then one's action is morally deficient in this respect.

- “in most cases”: excludes cases where people lack mental capacities, such as young children, or extreme situation (e.g., quick life-or-death decisions)
- “morally deficient” (as opposed to *rational* deficient): (1) morally wrong (you should not do it), (2) morally bad, (3) morally inferior to forming your own beliefs
- “sustained”: not just your initial basis of belief, but the ongoing grounds of your belief
- “deference”: you believe that p (or not-p) merely because another person believes that p (or not-p)

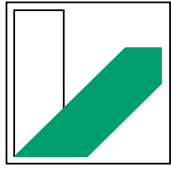
## 9 Political Deference

**WEAK OPTIMISM about political deference.** In most cases, if one politically acts on the basis of beliefs concerning a normative political subject matter, where these beliefs are only sustained on the basis of deference to someone else, then one's action is not morally deficient in this respect.

- Example. Imagine that your friend (whom you trust) tells you that you should vote for X party. You don't think about it, and vote for X. *Is this wrong?*
- Most political subject matters are a mix of empirical and normative questions. Deference on empirical matters seems less problematic.
- Cases where even normative political deference might be unproblematic: believing a fellow party member, believing a trusted acquaintance, believing someone of the same ethnicity or socio-economic class

# 10 The High-Stakes Argument

1. Political matters are **high-stakes**: they affect a large amounts of people in a fundamental way, severe errors are easy to make, and even small mistakes can lead to great inefficiencies and injustices.
2. Political matters are **very epistemically difficult**: even acquiring the competence to understand a small area of politics requires enormous amounts of experience, intellectual talent, etc.
3. If some subject matters is both high-stakes and epistemically difficult, then we should use the most reliable epistemic method to form opinions on the matter.
4. If we are not an expert on some subject matter ourselves, then the most reliable epistemic method to form opinions is to defer the identifiable experts.
5. In politics, we should usually defer to others.



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# Fake News and Echo Chambers

Political Epistemology

Matthias Brinkmann  
University of Bayreuth, Summer 2025

## 2 Today

- Rini on Fake News and Partisan Epistemology
- Nguyen on Cognitive Islands and Echo Chambers
- Are Philosophers Experts?
- Next Week



# Rini, “Fake News and Partisan Epistemology”

## 4 Defining Fake News

### — Fake News is

- ◇ Fake: the information contained in it is false
- ◇ Intentionally deceptive: the information is meant to appear as true, and known to be false; it is meant to deceive at least *a proportion* of recipients
- ◇ News: meant to be distributed to a large amount of people, and imitates the style and format of conventional news media

### — Contrasts

- ◇ Information one ideologically disagrees with
- ◇ Conspiracy Theories: not intentionally deceptive, and not always distributed in news form
- ◇ Propaganda: also often false and intentionally deceptive; but propaganda tends to have ideological or political aims, which fake news does not need to have (e.g., financial aims)
- ◇ Journalistic Errors/False Reporting: not normally intentionally deceptive
- ◇ Satire: not intentionally deceptive

## 5 Partisanship and Deference

1. If I know that I share partisan affiliation with someone else, I know that they share the same broad values as me.
2. Values also affect how one processes and judges descriptive information.
3. If such a person shares information, then I can trust that this person finds the information accurate and important in a way I would find it accurate and important.
4. Thus, absent defeaters, I have some reason to believe the information that fellow partisans give me.

## 6 Testimony and Fake News

- Testimony/believing others is typically a good way to gain beliefs
- Fake News ‘hijacks’ this method of gaining beliefs
- Even if its immediate effects are harmless, it might thus have an indirect harm: it undermines the social and epistemic trust necessary for ‘normal’ testimony to work
- Information on social media is treated as if it constituted testimony; but it is not clear whether this conventional norm should apply to social media
  - ◇ Rini: e.g., it is unclear whether reposting content counts as endorsement or not

## 7 Discussion

- Is Rini correct that believing partisans is even rational, even on purely descriptive information?
- How could sharing on social media be improved relevantly? E.g., could ‘reliability rankings’ help?

# Nguyen, 'Cognitive Islands and Runaway Echo Chambers'

## 9 The Core Problem (from Nguyen's Blog)

**What it's about, in a nutshell:** In some areas of intellectual life, you need to already be an expert to find the other experts. This opens a door to a horrible possibility: if you misunderstand things and use that misunderstanding to pick out who you trust, then that trust will simply compound your misunderstanding. Morally flawed people will pick morally flawed advisors and gurus, and bootstrap themselves into being worse people. But we have to trust. So we might just be screwed.

# 10 Cognitive Islands

- On the **cognitive mainland**, it is (comparatively) easy to identify an expert because various methods are available to identify experts
  - ◇ E.g., success criteria in the domain are obvious (good vs bad axe-thrower)
  - ◇ “Indirect calibration” is possible: expertise in another domain transfers to domain in question
- On **cognitive islands**, there are no tests available to identify experts
  - ◇ E.g., the domain is **subtle**: there are no external tests available (good vs bad painting)
  - ◇ E.g., the domain is **isolated**: expertise from other domains does not transfer
- **Morality** and **aesthetics** seem to be cognitive islands



# 11 The Credentials Problem

- This leads to “the **strong credentials problem**: given that the moral domain is both subtle and isolated, amoral non-expert has no resources with which to identify a moral expert”
  - ◇ Cholbi derives a strong form of pessimism from this observation: in morality, there is no one we can trust but ourselves
- Nguyen disagrees: he thinks that in a variety of realistic scenarios, we can still identify people who know better than us
  - ◇ Basic idea: I can assess the reliability of others on the basis of my own beliefs on the subject matter
  - ◇ In morality and aesthetics, it is unlikely that we have nothing to start from; we are not total novices

## 12 The Agreement Problem

- If identifying an expert relies on agreement with me, it seems that there could be no experts—at most epistemic peers
  - ◇ If others do not agree with me, I must assume that they are not experts!
- Nguyen objects that there are various ways how I can check whether someone is an expert beyond agreement
  - ◇ E.g., do they help me increase my understanding?
  - ◇ E.g., can they give me explanations and reasons?

# 13 The Public License Problem

- But this cannot entirely avoid the problem of relying on initial agreement
- We lack an **independent check** on whether someone is a moral expert (McGrath): there are no publicly agreed-upon experts
- This raises a fundamental threat:
  - “One is threatened with a **runaway personal echo chamber** when:
    1. One relies on other experts to check and reinforce one’s own abilities and beliefs.
    2. One evaluates others’ expertise through a deployment of one’s own abilities and beliefs.
    3. There is no check on failure for either individual or collective expertise whose application is independent of one’s own expert abilities.”
- I might end up in a “personal” echo chamber centered around me!
  - ◇ This entails possibility of “epistemic tragedy”: I get something completely wrong

## 14 Discussion

- Is there any way to escape the danger of ‘runaway echo chambers’?
- What would ‘epistemic tragedy’ be?
- What is the connection between Nguyen’s arguments and the common claim that social media platforms are echo chambers?

# Are Philosophers Experts?

## 16 Opening Questions

- You study philosophy. But what does philosophy make you an expert in?
- Do you know more about morality (or politics) than people who do not study philosophy?
- If not, what exactly are you becoming an expert in?

# 17 Weak and Strong Expertise

What are moral/political philosophers experts in?

- **Weak (formal) expertise:** philosophers are experts in moral analysis  
(Many defenders: e.g., Adams, Archard, Beauchamp, Birnbacher, Dahl, Eggerman, Follesdal, Hannon/Nguyen, Rasmussen, Scofield, Swift/White)
  - ◇ Structuring arguments, analysing concepts, knowing the history of thought, explaining the ideas of others, etc.
- **Strong (substantive) expertise:** philosophers are experts in moral judgment  
(Minority view: e.g., Gesang, Gordon, Singer, Vogelstein)
  - ◇ More true/more reliable beliefs about (political) morality

# 18 Do Philosophers Think They Have Expertise?



**Source:** Niv and Sulitzeanu-Kenan (forthcoming), "An empirical perspective on moral expertise", *Bioethics*



# 19 Challenges to Moral Expertise

Principled Challenges	Epistemic Challenges	Normative Challenges	Practical Challenges
<b>Metaethical Challenge:</b> there are no moral truths, and so nothing to be known—and thus no expert moral knowers.	<b>Identification Challenge:</b> there is no reliable method to identify experts on (political) morality. (Cholbi, Hoffmann, Lamb)	<b>Public Justification Challenge:</b> there are no experts on (political) morality which are justifiable to everyone. (Estlund, Rawls, Viehoff)	<b>Skill Challenge:</b> philosophical training, in principle, does not provide superior moral knowledge (Broad, Kymlicka, Rasmussen)
<b>Equal-Access Challenge:</b> morality is such that everyone has equal access to moral knowledge. (Kant, Kitcher, Locke)	<b>Deference Challenge:</b> it is wrong to defer to an identified expert on (political) morality (even if we can identify them). (Cowley, Hills, van Wietmarschen)	<b>Democratic Challenge:</b> political equality prohibits formally or informally recognising anyone's superior moral expertise (Archard, D'Agostino, Walzer)	<b>Disciplinary Challenge:</b> philosophy, in its current disciplinary form, prevents philosophers from developing superior moral knowledge (Schwitzgebel and Cushman, van der Vossen)

# Hannon on Post-Truth

*Political Epistemology*, University of Bayreuth, 22 July 2025  
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## TRUTH AND TRUTHFULNESS (42)

Truth, as a concept, has not been given up in contemporary political discourse (42-3). It is difficult to know what it would even mean to do without truth with respect to activities like believing, asserting, etc.

Williams suggests that truthfulness is accuracy plus sincerity. Perhaps people have given up on truthfulness. Frankfurt suggests that the contemporary problem is bullshit. But most voters seem to believe what they assert (44); indeed, the problem is that they often think that it is obvious what they believe. This is compatible with people sometimes making exaggerated, identity-affirming statements. But these claims are not “bullshit all the way down”.

## POST-SHAME AND POST-TRUTH (45)

Perhaps the problem is that objective facts have started to have less sway in politics. If we are surrounded by dishonesty, we become desensitised, and trust erodes. But at least an initial definition of post-truth from the OED is unhelpful (45-6).

## VALUING SINCERITY OVER ACCURACY (46)

Perhaps we have started to value sincerity over accuracy. Perhaps when Trump makes misleading statements, he just “speaks his mind”. But this supposes that voters are aware of the lack of truth in their statements, and value something else over truth (47). As a descriptive matter, this seems unlikely.

Perhaps people think there are no political truths (*metaphysical post-factualism*), or claim that we cannot come to know them (*epistemic*

*post-factualism*). But Hannon is again sceptical that the two types of post-factualism are particularly prevalent in our culture (48).

## ARE WE POST-TRUTH? (48)

Contrary to epistemic post-factualism, it is more likely that people are “naive realists” about politics: they think they are true answers, and that these are in some way obvious.

We should also not be romantic; contemporary problems are not in some way radically discontinuous from those of the past. (49)

Post-truth rhetoric—i.e., to invoke the notion of post-truth in diagnosing political discourse as toxic—is itself toxic (50). It is used often in asymmetric ways by liberals to accuse their political opponents (50). To say that someone doesn’t care about the truth is normative: a way of asserting epistemic authority over them (50).

Indeed, accusations of post-truth themselves tend to fall prey to a naive realism: my opponents disagree with me, so they must be stupid (50-1). Lee McIntyre’s invocation of Orwellian motto on book on post-truth (53): the truth is obvious.

The example of Corona lockdowns (52): the right choice wasn’t obvious. Levy: our opponents are as rational as us. Friedman: modern society is so complex that disagreement is always reasonable (51). Post-truth rhetoric also ignores how values shape information processing (53-4).

## “POST-TRUTH” IS BAD MORALITY (54)

Post-truth is an expression of smug American liberalism. It presumes that you are in possession of the truth, and other people aren’t. This threatens paternalism and an anti-democratic attitude (54-5).

This rhetoric also contributes to affective polarization (55). The ill effects of affective polarization (56).