

Introduction: Skeptical Problems in Political Epistemology

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1. Political Epistemology and Skeptical Challenges

Political epistemology, like most domains of philosophical research, is not only full of controversy regarding issues within the domain, but is full of controversy regarding what the domain, properly, is. On the one hand, political epistemology can be the philosophical study of how we can come to know and productively share our views about some set of political truths. So, like the moral epistemology of moral truths, political epistemology is devoted to determining how one might know whether some political principle is a good one or that one form of government is more just than another. On the other hand, political epistemology is taken to be about the interplay between political arrangements and the knowledge citizens of those polities have and can share. In essence, the question here is how particular political arrangements allow us to be sensitive to some reasons or evidence, and how others produce other sensitivities (or insensitivities). This duality between the two programs, effectively between the epistemology of political truths and the political background of epistemology, can produce intense but fecund exchanges.

All epistemologies, regardless of their orientation, have the general question of how knowledge is possible at their core. How can we know political truths; how, given the intellectual variances that political arrangements produce, can we know much of anything? The skeptical challenge, then, comes along with this question of how knowledge is possible. Skeptical challenges come in a variety of forms, but there are two general classes of skeptical problems for claims to knowledge.

The first type of skeptical challenge is best considered as a challenge to whether the task of coming to know (and whether knowledge as a phenomenon) is completeable. The familiar regress problem for justification is exemplary, since the trilemma of options for supporting reasons seems to defeat the possibility of justified beliefs. Either one ends the regress with unsupported reasons, reasons in a circle, or one's reasons stretch on without end. None of these three options seems satisfactory for the justification requisite for knowledge. Consider the moral skeptic who may say that because all of our judgments are so connected to deeper controversial commitments, we can never have sufficient justification to hold many of our substantive ethical beliefs. Or

consider a version of closure-based skeptical challenge – that if one knows a proposition and that the known proposition entails another, then if one competently deduces that following proposition from the initially known, then one knows that following proposition. The trouble is that closure, as intuitive as it is, produces paradox for knowledge. For example, one may know that one has hands and one may know that if one has hands, one is not in a computer simulation. But one does not know that one is not in a computer simulation. From these examples, the first skeptical challenge of completing one's knowledge shows that we think of knowledge as having a systematic element to it – our knowledge, *qua* knowledge, must be something that not only allows us to make sense of many other things beyond what's known, but it is the product of our having made sense of many other things. The skeptical challenge is to whether this broad cognitive competence is at all completable.

The second kind of skeptical challenge is less to the possibility of knowledge *überhaupt*, but to the actuality of knowledge in particular cases. These challenges to knowledge are, then, domain restricted. In these cases, what is necessary for the skeptical argument is that some crucial piece of evidence is missing or some central intellectual capacity is not possessed. And so, in religion, for example, the agnostic may say that because the matter is so complex and the truth is hidden, we cannot know whether God exists. Or one may say that, because of our particular limitations of perspective, we cannot synthesize the complex evidence for and against a thesis. Call this the *controversy* problem for knowledge.

The two basic skeptical challenges, that of *completability* and *controversy*, have political epistemic instances. Completability challenges can take the form of recognizing that justification for political arrangements depend on a view of human nature, the significance of some core value, or a moral viewpoint. But each of these must be known to have the status they purport to have in supporting our political knowledge, and it is unclear we have such knowledge of moral truths, or facts about human nature. Alternately, controversy challenges arise in cases of voter ignorance and in instances of reasonable pluralism. So, for example, the controversies regarding causes of inflation or effects of raising the minimum wage are persistent among experts, so how can we expect voters to unravel these issues? Or, given the deep disagreements about the diversity of values, how can we expect a reasoned justification for policy to be anything but question-begging?

We should hasten to add that in liberal-democratic settings, the issues for controversy versions of skeptical challenge are compounded. This is because democratic institutions, insofar as they respect the liberty and equality of their citizens, owe justification to these citizens that they can access, understand, and endorse. Insofar as a state wields coercive power over its citizens, that power is oppressive when those citizens cannot see the reasons behind it. Coercion should be hard to justify, and this restriction keeps coercion to be restricted only

to policies that are endorsable by those who are relevantly tied to the policy. So, given this constraint, being right isn't sufficient for political justification, nor is simply knowing one is right. Instead, the requirement is that of being able to show that one knows to any audience who may have concerns, or at least those who are affected by the policy. This is a particularly demanding norm, and it is in place to restrict policies that would otherwise be mere browbeating when it comes to reason-giving. And so, for political epistemologists in the liberal-democratic vein, the fact of reasonable pluralism poses a particularly difficult version of the skeptical problem of controversy.

Further, when we consider the fact that political polarization, both in the form of political parties views growing further apart and in the form of members of parties having individually more radical views only on the basis of their membership of the group, makes productive communication more difficult, and so deliberation that would produce well-founded resolution (or knowledge) seems unlikely. Epistemic injustices, refusals to acknowledge standing to speak, and pernicious representation of one's political opponents are all part-and-parcel with a populace that suffers from these kinds of widening divides. Skeptical consequences ensue.

Anti-skeptical responses in political epistemology depend on roughly two sorts of thoughts. The first is a mitigating commitment – that the norms of knowledge and justification (and in particular, the kind of public justification required for political epistemic ends) behind the skeptical challenges are too demanding. More modest norms can still capture our political epistemic aspirations, but they need not have the dire skeptical challenges. And so, some anti-skeptical replies to pluralism-based skeptical arguments, for example, appeal to less demanding accessibility norms for the justification of policy (e.g., that of overlapping consensus or patterns of *modus vivendi* political arrangements). The second kind of anti-skeptical program is that of showing that the skeptical challenges are, in fact, answerable. In these cases, the skeptic has, according to the anti-skeptic, under-described the intellectual situation. A more complete representation of our cognitive resources yields at least prospects for knowledge. For example, those who argue against polarization-based skeptical programs may reply that mixed-view deliberation can arrest polarization and even yield de-biased outcomes.

2. Essays in this Issue

While each of the eight articles within this special issue can stand alone raising salient issues within the domain of epistemology, as a collection they highlight the full scope of skeptical issues regarding completability and controversy. The special issue begins with Emily McGill's article "Is Liberalism Disingenuous? Truth and Lies in Political Liberalism." McGill analyzes critiques of the Rawlsian political program which assert that the program is merely political ideology, due to the programs 'prohibition on truth.' If the Rawlsian liberal program not only

emphasizes, but is grounded upon a social ontology that is individualized and insensitive to identities, then the political landscape will be plagued with epistemic blind spots regarding oppression. That is to say that the Rawlsian program manifests and maintains the skeptic's controversial challenge. McGill holds that this challenge fails to gain traction given Rawls's endorsement of substantive truths. Of a similar concern, the next article, Eric Morton's "Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Burdens of Judgement" defends the compatibility of pragmatism with a Rawlsian version of value pluralism. Morton directly engages with Talisse and Aikin who argue that pragmatists are unable to be unfailing pluralists due to 1- the incompatibility of the metaphysics of deep pluralism and pragmatist meta-ethics, and 2- the clash between a pragmatist's commitments to meliorism and a sense of strong epistemic pluralism. Morton argues that both lines are unfounded, so the skeptical consequences of pluralism need not follow. While McGill's article exemplified particular issues regarding the skeptic's controversy challenge, Morton's work exemplifies the skeptic's completeness challenges, insofar as Morton's responses to Talisse and Aikin depends upon the status of the commitments an epistemic pluralist must take.

Shannon Fyfe's article "Testimonial Injustice in International Criminal Law" differs from the previous two primarily because Fyfe focuses on legal epistemology, statutes regarding testimony within international courts, and the instances of epistemic injustice that lead to skeptical consequences. In order to help mitigate such instances, Fyfe advocates hearers in international courtrooms to practice testimonial justice, not only for the epistemic aims of truth, but also to achieve political aims such as justice. The practice of epistemic justice cannot completely rid international criminal courts of skeptical consequences, because the structures of the courts is such that there are still some instances that will fall through the cracks so to speak. Fyfe nevertheless presents a solution in hopes of mitigating these occurrences.

The next three articles focus more on the nature of politically deep disagreements and the normative aspects of how we should disagree or engage in politically charged arguments. Scott Aikin's "Dialecticality and Deep Disagreement" is an analysis of the problem of deep disagreement in terms of the skeptical problem of the regress of reasons. In particular, Aikin argues that it is the dialecticality requirement of arguments that makes the persistent controversy found in deep disagreement analogous to the skeptical problem of the defeating regress. Further, Aikin argues that the dialecticality norm is an appealing norm, given pragmatic and recognitional background commitments for arguers. This makes the problem of deep disagreement a unique form of regress problem, because the iterating condition cannot be denied without undoing the argumentative context. Connie Wang's analysis "Beyond Argument: A Hegelian Approach to Deep Disagreements" criticizes both the optimistic and pessimistic account of deep disagreement. At first glance, both of these accounts

seem to agree upon very little – as optimists assert that some rational resolution can occur within deep disagreements, while pessimists reject this notion. However, Wang asserts that both views operate under the assumption that argumentation is the only means by which we can come to rational resolutions. This assumption is challenged and Wang offers another solution – one that utilizes a Hegelian-informed approach. This “argument-plus approach” aims to incorporate more than just ‘rational’ concerns when we exchange information and engage within dialogue. Tempest Henning’s article, “Bringing Wreck,” offers a critical analysis of the non-adversarial feminist argumentation model, specifically in regards to the ways in which we should engage in arguments. A skeptical controversial challenge is raised against such an argumentative model, especially concerning the model’s assumptions of politeness within communicative exchanges. Henning argues that what is missing from the non-adversarial feminist argumentation model is a detailed analysis of politeness in culture and contexts that are non-white. In order to fully flesh out the argument, Henning examines politeness norms within African American women’s speech communities, which runs in opposition to the norms deemed to be ethical and conducive to reason exchange by the non-adversarial feminist argumentation model. Henning concludes that the model incorrectly condemns many linguistic and argumentative practices found within African American women’s speech communities, so while the model seeks to epitomize *all* women’s argumentative styles, it is a model that is grounded in a very specific demographic of women – white middle class women.

The last two papers are unique insofar as both articles more directly engage with the extent to which affective states can play a role in argumentation and debate. In “Arrogance, Anger, and Debate,” Alessandra Tanesini links states such as arrogance and anger as detrimental to epistemic practices. When one engages in *superbia*, one is prone to dismiss others’ epistemic contributions, and one has a propensity of over self-inflate the support for one’s own views. And, worse, one is often tempted resort to intimidation and humiliation of other epistemic agents. These tactics are enacted as an attempt to free oneself from having to give justifications for one’s viewpoint – that is to say such individuals deploy anger as a means to intimidating interlocutors so individuals will not have to provide justifications or reasons for their arguments. For Tanesini, anger, especially stemming from an arrogant individual, harms political discourse. Conversely, Howes and Hundleby in “The Epistemology of Anger in Argumentation” argue that anger has not only a vital role to play within argumentation, but the emotional state can also serve as a positive epistemic resource which can enhance arguments and debates. Anger can function as an aide to reasoners because it can increase their accuracy in pinpoint for whom and towards what cause argumentation serves. Emotions, for Howes and Hundleby, possess a cognitive power akin to reason and judgment, albeit the emotion’s effectiveness can depend upon the manner it is employed, so can be a

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detriment to argumentation. But in particular circumstances, anger is a powerful tool that not only helps to identify the goals of arguments, but also can serve as a gauge to better evaluate arguments importance.

We believe our collection here is representative of groundbreaking thought on the intersection of political philosophy and epistemology. In particular, these essays provide significant work on the skeptical challenges that arise when one asks questions about the connections between how and whether justice and knowledge are possible.