

On the possibility of right answers in politics

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Abstract

What kinds of political questions should be handled by experts? This article draws out a tension in democratic theory between popular rule and technical expertise. It sets out a taxonomy of the types of political question we might encounter, and elucidates the extent to which democratic delegation is defensible in each case. I find that the scope for legitimate democratic delegation to experts varies with the political unit's degree of consensus on (1) the paradigms used to understand the non-political world and (2) the objectives to be furthered through collective action. The legitimate role of the expert will be largest when there is consensus on these concepts, and smallest under conditions of dissensus, particularly those exacerbated by political polarization. This variation in the legitimate role of experts complicates political theories based on mechanisms for eliciting “the right answers,” such as the Condorcet Jury Theorem. There seem to be at least two senses in which political outcomes may be said to be correct and incorrect, one relating to achievement of the agreed end through the agreed paradigm, and another relating to the correspondence between the end so achieved and the requirements of justice. By disambiguating these cases, this article contributes to recent debates in epistocracy by clarifying the precise sense(s) in which a political question may be said to have a correct answer.

I

There is a tension in democratic politics between popular rule and expertise. We want the people to rule, but we also in some sense want the “best” or the “right” decisions to

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be made. This article will suggest that the scope for legitimate democratic delegation to experts varies with the political unit's degree of consensus on paradigms and objectives. To deepen this conjecture, I develop a crude taxonomy of the varieties of political choices that legislatures are called upon to make. Although many scholars have sought to develop a taxonomy of the varieties of expertise (e.g. Turner 2001), fewer authors have considered the background level of political consensus as a mediating factor in determinations of the legitimacy of expert delegation. I argue that there exist at least three distinct cases or situations of agreement or disagreement that characterize political units, and that the role of experts will differ according to the degree of contestation that attends each type. Further, I suggest that the legitimate role of experts in a given society will depend on that society's degree of cohesion regarding the objectives to be sought through politics and the paradigms through which these objectives are to be pursued, and that conditions of ideological diversity or polarization will restrict the range of political questions that can be legitimately delegated to experts.¹ This is to suggest that political pluralism, though desirable for many reasons, imposes an efficiency cost on democratic politics. In cases of deep epistemological disagreement, these costs will be high, and the scope of legitimate delegation to experts will be low.

Why might the use of expertise in democratic politics pose problems for democracy? Democratic politics, after all, involve the interaction of citizens in possession of many kinds of expertise, with the expectation that the interaction of these varieties of human expertise will redound to the benefit of all members of the political unit. It may be the case, however, that we can identify a qualitatively different kind of expertise, which I will call here "scientific" expertise. Some scholars have argued, for example, that "there is an unbridgeable cultural gap...between the world of illusions under which the ordinary member of the public operates and the worlds of 'expert cultures'" (Turner 128).² It is argued that scientific expertise is superior to unscientific expertise, in

¹I use 'paradigm' in its natural language sense of a pattern or model, not in the more restricted use suggested by Kuhn 1962.

²Political theorists will be reminded here of Plato's distinction between knowledge and opinion (e.g. *Meno*), though contemporary theorists tend to express it as one between "ideology" and knowledge.

the sense that its “truth-tracking” propensity will be higher than any “non-scientific” expertise pertaining to the same subject.

If we accept the existence of a superior category of knowledge with a higher claim to truth (such as scientific expertise), much seems to follow. For example, if there is a truth about how the state should be governed, which some some know, while others do not, why not simply empower those who know to rule? Plato takes precisely this view (*Republic*), and contemporary theorists have deepened this approach by developing theories of epistemic democracy, or epistocracy (e.g. Cohen 1986, Landemore 2013).³ While these theories usually follow the first step of Plato’s argument, and agree that there is indeed a truth of the matter about how the *polis* should be ruled, they typically dissent from Plato’s second claim, that only those who know the truth should be permitted to rule. In general, there are two bases for this dissent. In the first group are those who think that the mere fact that decisions are arrived at in accordance with democratic procedure means that they *do* in fact advance the common good *ipso facto* (e.g. Cohen 1986), and in the second group we find those who think that democratic procedure is an adequate though imperfect “truth-tracker” (e.g. Estlund 2008).⁴ In this paper, I examine the claims of this second group, particularly their assertion that there exists a procedure-independent political truth that can serve as a kind of Archimedian fulcrum for the evaluation of political outcomes.

For example, two prominent epistemic democrats write: “[t]he hallmark of the epistemic approach, in all its forms, is its fundamental premise that there exists some procedure-independent fact of the matter as to what the best or right outcome is. A

For example, “...if the liberal state is supposed to be ideologically neutral, how is it to decide what is and is not ideology as distinct from knowledge?” (Turner 125).

³Plato’s approach is more accurately called noocracy, from the conjunction of *νοῦς* and *κρατοῦς*: “rule of the mind”. This is because Plato believed that the wise, to the extent that they were wise, would be unanimous, because genuine reason operates in the same way no matter the particular mind in which it happens to be instantiated. We will encounter traces of this unitary view of reason in the work of contemporary political theorists. Contrast this view with Machiavelli’s (and Madison’s) acceptance of fundamental political conflict as the source of a society’s dynamism.

⁴I can only note here the interesting possibility that these views might be reconciled by viewing the truth in terms of the common good, much as the sovereign defines the proper use of terms in Book I of Hobbes’ *Leviathan*.

pure epistemic approach tells us that our social decision rules ought be chosen so as to track that fact” (Goodin and List 2001:280). Similarly, others assert that “there are true (at least in the minimal sense) procedure-independent normative standards by which political decisions ought to be judged” (Estlund 2008:30). All these approaches seek to avoid “the incompetence of voters who, perhaps as a result of their ignorance and prejudices, are not likely to make right decisions on their own” (Morreau 2021).

We should begin by noting that there is certainly non-procedural importance to at least *some* democratic decisions. In the limit, democracies that make certain choices survive and prosper, while those which make other choices fail to survive at all. I take these pro-survival choices to make up at least some portion of what Goodin and List call “the best or right outcome(s)” that an epistemic approach to democracy ought to privilege. But the set of right outcomes may be broader than those where the community shares an interest in survival. In addition to its collective interest in survival, a political community may also share an interest in more nebulous concepts like equality or justice. As we will see, the political unit’s collective judgment on whether it has justice is not likely to approach the consensus attaching to whether or not it has survived.

The apparent objectivity of the standards of justice has given rise to hopes of deploying this independent standard to evaluate political outcomes. One prominent epistemic democrat writes that because the standards of justice are independent of the standards of democratic procedure, decisions produced by such procedures can be independently evaluated for correctness against that abstract standard of justice (Estlund 2008:24).⁵ Other theorists have seen the objective content of justice as a subset of the objective content of morality more generally. For example, it has been argued that citizens in democratic politics draw on their “moral competence,” which indicates “how well one approximates the truth in moral matters” (Christiano 2008:119). While the difficulty of arriving at consensus on moral matters has convinced most of these epistemic democrats

⁵In this way, it may be possible to legitimate even “incorrect” outcomes if they derive from a procedure to which no qualified objections can be made (Estlund 2008:106).

that appeals to such “truths” should be bracketed for the purposes of political discussion, it is sufficient for my purposes to point out that they nevertheless rely on this set of “right answers” to evaluate the outcomes to which actual democratic procedures lead. Democracy, so understood, is a necessarily-imperfect mechanism: it is the best we can do, given the need to justify the answers which we know to be right to those who might (incorrectly) be inclined to dispute them. Finally, some epistocrats take an alluringly simple approach to political questions, arguing that because “the truth is constant and singular, while error is multiple and random,” political truth can be reached by simply aggregating individual expertise (Goodin and Spiekermann 2018:4, see also Morreau 2021).

It is worth reflecting on the disanalogies between group survival and group justice. Group survival is relatively unambiguous, while group justice, by contrast, is quite ambiguous. The very fact that we exist means *ipso facto* that we have survived, but it would be unwarranted to conclude that because we exist, we have justice. The questions appear to be of different classes or categories. The proposition “if we do this, we will survive” can be empirically verified (to be sure, only *post hoc*), while the proposition “if we do this, we will have justice” seems much more difficult to verify or falsify. It seems that the dissensus regarding the intension of the concept “justice” is much broader than the dissensus attaching to the concept “survival,” though we can certainly imagine a community with a tight consensus on the content of “justice,” perhaps so tight as to approach their consensus on the content of “survival.” We see here two types of political question, or perhaps the potential for any political question to be viewed in at least two ways, depending on the degree of consensus within the political community on the concepts required to articulate it.⁶

⁶Concepts such as justice may be “essentially contested” (Gallie 1956), meaning that it is in their very nature to be contested, and that by contesting their use we are in fact using them properly. For my purposes, it is sufficient to note that the content of the concept “justice” is much more likely to be contested than the content of the concept “survival”.

II

To draw out the implications of the two classes of political proposition that I introduced at the end of the last section for the role of experts in democratic politics, I will try to construct a rudimentary taxonomy of political questions. With this taxonomy in hand, I will return in Part III to the questions about abstract truth raised by epistemic democrats, and I will try to show that both proceduralists and epistocrats have taken an unwarrantedly unitary view of the types of decisions that democratic polities are called upon to make. To embark on this discussion, I propose that we consider the metaphor of the ship of state. The ship of state is a somewhat hackneyed metaphor,⁷ but it is a useful starting point because we can think of the metaphor of sailors on a ship as representing the extreme case of interest alignment in a democracy. Because the sailors on a ship at sea will literally sink or swim together, the potential for free-riding is greatly reduced, and the proportion of each individual's interest shared by other group members is high. We can think of this metaphor as most appropriate in the high-stakes context of small-group survival that was characteristic of the human condition for hundreds of thousands of years (Bowles and Gintis 2011:111-115), and it will likely seem decreasingly appropriate as we approach a pluralistic modern society with a low chance of existential conflict.⁸ Nevertheless, we may be able to glean some insights by considering the role of experts in a pre-modern context. Consider for example the following extract from the Icelandic *Laxdaela Saga*, written by an anonymous author in the thirteenth century. The young hero Olaf, just eighteen, is embarking from the southern coast of Norway, setting sail for Ireland.

Then the king and Gunnhild bade Olaf farewell. Olaf and his men got on board, and sailed out to sea at once. They came in for unfavourable

⁷I seek here to recover something more unitary than the anti-majoritarian use to which the ship of state metaphor was put by Plato (Republic 488a-489d). A better example for my purposes is Longfellow's poem "O Ship of State".

⁸Compare Horace's Ode 1.14, which foregrounds the threatening presence of other states within the ship of state metaphor. One of the unfortunate casualties of the division of political science into subfields is that the role of external threats in generating state cohesion is often minimized in political theory. Bowles and Gintis (2011) show that historically it was of fundamental importance.

weather through the summer, had fogs plentiful, and little wind, and what there was was unfavourable; they drifted about all over the ocean, and on most on board lost all sense of direction. But at last the fog lifted over head; and the wind rose, and they put up sail. Then they began to discuss in which direction Ireland was to be sought; and they could not agree on it. Orn [the captain] said one thing, and most of the men went against him, and said that Orn was all bewildered: they should rule who were the greater in number. Then Olaf was asked to decide. He said, "I think we should follow the counsel of the shrewdest, for the counsels of foolish men I think will be of all the worse service for us in the greater number they gather together." And now they deemed the matter settled, since Olaf spake in this manner; and Orn took the steering from that time. They sailed for days and nights, but always with very little wind. One night the watchmen leapt up, and bade every one wake at once, and said they saw land [Ireland] so near that they had almost struck it (Anonymous 90).

Let's examine the parameters of this collective decision to delegate an important political decision to an expert. We have 1) agreement about the destination (Ireland), 2) agreement on the paradigm to be used in locating the destination (celestial navigation), but 3) disagreement as to whose use of the agreed paradigm would lead most readily to the agreed destination. As noted above, we also have close alignment of interests, in the sense that it is impossible for some but not all of the sailors to arrive in Ireland. On the basis of these observations, I identify a class of political questions which I will label Case 1.

Case 1. *When there is broad agreement both as to the objective and as to the paradigm to be used to achieve it, there is a strong ground for delegating the political decision to a citizen (or group of citizens) who is (are) expert in the agreed paradigm, because the decision made by these experts is likely to maximize satisfaction without a substantial cost to democratic legitimacy.*

I take the situation described by Case 1 to be the situation of much pre-modern government (Bowles and Gintis 2011).⁹ Agreement on the objective is much more likely in situations of urgency and danger, where the outlines of a threat to the community or

⁹Although political theorists do not tend to emphasize the fact that states are located within systems of other states (for an exception, see Beitz 1979), the mere presence of potentially-aggressive outsiders imposes a degree of unity on such states that is much less apparent in the modern era (compare Tilly 1992). To the important objection that many pre-modern states were not democracies, see Stasavage 2020.

an opportunity before it are clear to all. Similarly, agreement on a particular paradigm is much more likely in the monistic atmosphere of a pre-modern state.¹⁰ In such a context, the expert's role is one that we might describe as "technical," in the sense that an expert like Orn is merely doing what all agree to be necessary, employing the same techniques known to and approved by all in the service of a purpose common to all.

As societies become more highly differentiated, it becomes more difficult to identify the existence of broad agreement on either objectives or paradigms. Although technical questions remain, they seem to be supplemented by a more difficult class of questions that feature disagreement on either 1) the objectives that the state should pursue or 2) the paradigm(s) to be used in pursuing those objectives. For reasons that will become apparent, I will provisionally call these "contested" questions. Characteristic of such questions is the difficulty of satisfying all citizens that either the objective or the paradigm is soundly chosen. In fact, the impossibility of justifying the answer to a moral question beyond the paradigm in which it was first articulated led some politically-minded philosophers to conclude that such questions did not have "right answers" at all. Here is Plato's Socrates, in deep discussion with the sophist Protagoras.

I wonder, I said, whether I follow what you are saying; for you appear to be speaking of the civic science, and undertaking to make men good citizens.

That, Socrates, he replied, is exactly the purport of what I profess.

Then it is a goodly accomplishment that you have acquired, to be sure, I remarked, if indeed you have acquired it. For this is a thing, Protagoras, that I did not suppose to be teachable; but when you say it is, I do not see how I am to disbelieve it. How I came to think that it cannot be taught, or provided by men for men, I may be allowed to explain.

I say, in common with the rest of the Greeks, that the Athenians are wise. Now I observe, when we are collected for the Assembly, and the city has to deal with an affair of building, we send for builders to advise us on what is proposed to be built; and when it is a case of laying down a ship, we send for shipwrights; and so in all other matters which are considered learnable and teachable: but if anyone else, whom the people do not regard as a

¹⁰I do not wish to minimize the multiplicity of perspectives that were excluded from a role in government in the pre-modern era, but simply to note that the range of interests in such a context is likely to have been less broad than the range of interests present in a contemporary pluralistic democracy.

craftsman, attempts to advise them, no matter how handsome and wealthy and well-born he may be, not one of these things induces them to accept him; they merely laugh him to scorn and shout him down, until either the speaker retires from his attempt, overborne by the clamor, or the tipstaves pull him from his place or turn him out altogether by order of the chair. Such is their procedure in matters which they consider professional.

But when they have to deliberate on something connected with the administration of the State, the man who rises to advise them on this may equally well be a smith, a shoemaker, a merchant, a sea-captain, a rich man, a poor man, of good family or of none, and nobody thinks of casting in his teeth, as one would in the former case, that his attempt to give advice is justified by no instruction obtained in any quarter, no guidance of any master; and obviously it is because they hold that here the thing cannot be taught. (Protagoras 319)¹¹

There is much to interest us here. In the discussion of building projects, Plato's Socrates identifies cases of agreement on the objective and on the paradigm. Like Olaf, Socrates clearly thinks the "counsels of foolish men" are of no use in such cases. Indeed, the "matters which they [the Athenians] consider professional" seem to be similar to what I have called "technical" questions. However, unlike Olaf, Socrates opens the door to an additional class of question, involving "the administration of the State".¹² It is not yet clear what we are to make of this class of question. It is clearly value-laden, in the sense that these questions involve citizens in making normative judgments, but how exactly do these normative judgments differ from the normative judgment that it would be desirable to arrive safely in Ireland?

I propose that it is the contested nature of the moral principles involved that caused Plato to despair of right answers to this type of political question.¹³ When all agree that it would be desirable to employ a particular paradigm in the service of an agreed end, it seems clear that such a political question has a "right" answer, or at least a

¹¹Although the political system described here existed some sixteen centuries before Olaf's chieftom, it is clearly more variegated, complex and pluralistic.

¹²According to the editors, Socrates means "public ethical questions: whether a given policy, or institution, or public decision, is right or wrong, fair or unfair, good or bad. He does not mean administrative or logistical questions" (note 33).

¹³The distinction between subjects that are "learnable and teachable" and those that are not pre-occupied Plato, and he went so far as to assert that skill in government could not be taught, citing as evidence the regression to the moral mean of prominent politicians' sons (Protagoras 320a-d).

set of worse answers and a set of better answers, distinguished on the basis of how effectively they achieve the agreed end.¹⁴ It is an open question, however, whether such a “right” answer would also be “right” in terms of any particular conception of justice. This observation points the way to at least two senses in which political outcomes may be said to be correct or incorrect: one relating to achievement of the agreed end through the agreed paradigm, and another relating to the correspondence between the end so achieved and the requirements of justice. It also reveals that what we mean by a “right” answer to a political question is paradigm-contingent, which is to say that its “rightness” only attaches given some particular paradigm, and is meaningless if stripped from its original context.

By contrast, we might understand the non-technical class of political questions that Plato identifies (those concerned with the “administration of the State”) as comprising those questions where the values by which some political action will be judged are themselves in dispute. If some of Olaf’s sailors had wished the ship to sail not to Ireland but, say, to Iceland, it seems obvious that delegation of the navigation to Orn would take on a very different (and more despotic) character. While the sailors were able to tolerate Olaf’s brutally frank characterization of their navigation skills, they would be much less likely to accept that their capacity for choosing destinations was equally deficient. This second class of assertions may be generally termed “paternalistic,” in the sense that to assert that another citizen’s judgment regarding the ends to be achieved through politics is deficient is tantamount to urging that they be excluded from the political process entirely. It seems clear that where there is disagreement on the objective, delegation to an expert will not seem legitimate to those who disagree with the objective the expert is tasked with performing. In addition, because experts are experts in some particular paradigm, disagreement on the paradigm to be used in carrying out the task will lead to a similar loss of legitimacy as will disagreement over

¹⁴Because achieving an agreed end is not costless, but must be balanced against other ends that citizens care about, it is possible that disputes could even enter Case 1 questions. These would be disputes not about whether or not the task should be delegated to an expert, but rather about the opportunity cost of performing the task at all.

the objective. On this basis, I identify a second class of political questions.

Case 2. *When there is substantial disagreement regarding either the objective to be pursued or the paradigm to be used to achieve it, delegation of the political decision itself to a citizen (or group of citizens) who is (are) expert in the agreed paradigm is undesirable, because citizens who do not accept either the end to be achieved or the paradigm to be used will be unable to accept the epistemic authority of the expert, resulting in a loss of democratic legitimacy.*¹⁵

Many of the most fraught contemporary political questions seem to belong to this second class, and it seems that to delegate their actual *decision* to experts would have deleterious effects on legitimacy.¹⁶ I have called these “contested” questions. However, it seems likely that many if not most of these contested questions can be decomposed into contested and technical components. It is also quite likely that a role for experts remains, even where the question cannot be decomposed, though this role will not involve actually making the political decision. In a sense, it was loose to call examples of Case 1 “political” questions at all. What we mean (in natural language) by calling a particular question “political” is roughly what I have indicated here in my definition of Case 2: that the grounds for evaluation are themselves contested.

Let’s consider the case for decomposition. Take Plato’s example above: the democratic assembly must decide some matter of “administration of the State” (recall that the editors tell us that such questions are “public ethical questions: whether a given policy, or institution, or public decision, is right or wrong, fair or unfair, good or bad” (note 33)). To fix intuitions, let’s select an example policy question, something like “shall we declare war on Sparta?”. Clearly, this is a Case 2 question, in the sense that neither the objective nor the paradigm is likely to be widely shared. Should we go to

¹⁵Because any short-run efficiency gains will likely be counterbalanced by a loss of legitimacy, citizens will be chary of delegating such tasks to experts. While the connection between legitimacy and efficient government is elusive, I here make what I take to be an uncontroversial liberal assumption that the pursuit of efficient government requires at least some level of legitimacy, or at least that a widespread perception of illegitimacy impairs efficient government.

¹⁶However, it may be the case that the strategic incentives of democratic politics require the delegation of certain tasks (such as central banking and the selection of an independent civil service) to experts in spite of their contested nature, in order to avoid consequent opportunities for state capture. The propriety of this delegation raises difficult questions, and interested readers can turn to the sensitive discussion of *akrasia* in Elster 1985.

war at all? How should we determine that going to war with Sparta is a good idea? There can be many answers to these questions, and equally many evaluative criteria. But notice that technical questions lurk beneath the surface. How powerful is Sparta's army? If we fight with normal methods, will we be likely to win? What else might happen while we're at war? Does Sparta have an accurate estimate of our strength? What will our allies do? What will *their* allies do? Many of these subsidiary questions can be characterized as Case 1 questions, in the sense that they are questions on which there is probably broad agreement on the objective and paradigm to be used.¹⁷ There seems to be a role for experts in Case 2 questions, but only to the extent that such questions can be decomposed into their Case 1 and Case 2 elements.¹⁸

While I think that the two cases just described largely exhaust the type of political questions that come before modern democratic legislatures, I will close this section by identifying a troubling third type of political question that seems at least conceptually possible. We have already seen an expansion of complexity as we moved from questions that ask how best to get the ship to Ireland to questions that ask where the ship ought to go. The third type of question I have in mind disputes that the ship is a ship at all. Provisionally calling such Case 3 questions "constitutional" questions, I suggest that they feature epistemological disagreement as to the facts by which the values we use to judge Case 2 questions are calibrated. Our values are not static givens, but change over time on the basis of our experience in the world. Case 3 situations involve a disruption in the two-way feedback between our values and our actions, whereby the consequences of our actions are systematically misrepresented to us, such that adaptive adjustment of our values either does not take place or takes a form inimical to democratic politics.

In this section, I argued that there exist at least three distinct varieties of political question, and that the role of experts will differ according to the degree of contestation

¹⁷Although it is possible that citizens could suggest a new paradigm (for example, basing our estimate of Spartan strength not on careful observation of their military exercises but on, say, the utterances of the Delphic oracle), such contestation would merely make the matter a Case 2 question.

¹⁸There will of course remain irreducible Case 2 elements at the end of any such decomposition process. There may also be certain Case 2 questions that cannot be decomposed. More on this below.

that attends each type of political question. As a result, I observed that the legitimate role of experts in a given democratic society will depend on that society's degree of consensus regarding objectives and paradigms, and we should expect that the proportion of political questions taking a Case 1 form will be highest in relatively cohesive and monolithic societies, and lowest in contexts of dissension and polarization.

III

The general principle that I identified in section II is that the scope for democratic delegation to experts varies with the group's degree of consensus on paradigms and objectives.¹⁹ With this principle in mind, I wish now to return to contemporary democratic theory and the search for right answers. As we have seen, many epistemic democrats believe there to be a procedure-independent standard against which political decisions can be judged. However, even among those "procedural" democratic theorists who do not emphasize the epistemic utility of democratic procedure in "getting it right," we still encounter the background assumption of right answers.

Although I will ultimately focus on those epistemic democrats who argue that "the aim of democracy is to track the truth" (Goodin and List 2001), in this section I will begin by showing how the assumption of right answers is pervasive in contemporary democratic theory, even in systems that do not require an absolute, procedure-independent standard to function. We have already seen several versions of this position in Part I. The existence of paradigm-independent moral truth is so obvious to many contemporary theorists that they do not make great efforts to defend it, and it mainly plays a background role in theories that are rightly famous for other reasons. Invocations of moral truth are typically careful, and freighted with advisory warnings that the existence of a moral truth does not preclude disagreement or contestation as to its content. For example, Christiano (2008) argues that despite widespread conscientious disagree-

¹⁹I have striven to avoid the terminology of ends and means, as used by, e.g., Berlin (1997a). While I find it useful, it is also incomplete, in the sense that what is an end to some may be a means to others. I am not sure that I have escaped this difficulty by suggesting new terminology.

ment regarding how equality is to be realized, “there are truths of the matter here” (2008:60). As we have seen, Christiano defines moral competence as “how well one approximates the truth in moral matters” (ibid:119). Even our interests can be established *a priori* (ibid:65, 139). Although Christiano goes on to develop the view that it would be impermissible for us to appeal to these right answers in a democratic context, this demurral is not because he thinks the idea of a moral right answer is incoherent or unknowable, but rather because democracy’s public realization of equality ought to take priority over getting it right. The existence of right answers is simply assumed: we have an interest in “believing the truth” about morality (ibid:154).

For Christiano, these right answers cannot simply be matters of convention, “right now and around here,” because they exist prior to the “conscientious disagreement” that might give rise to a local interpretation (ibid:68). These are universal right answers, not dependent on any particular paradigm. And unsurprisingly, those who know the right answers would be more reliable guides, if only it weren’t necessary to proceed democratically for reasons of justice.²⁰ Doing the right thing, on this view, can be unjust if it is done in an undemocratic way (126). Christiano asks (and answers) what a group might agree to if all its members were properly informed and conscientiously trying to determine the best course of action. He thinks that even if someone possessed the whole truth, it would, given the “facts of disagreement,” amount to indefensible hubris to impose it on others (67).

It is important to note that liberal rights do not imply a denial that there is a right answer to the questions of what will make a person’s life go best. Indeed, the thought is that there is a fair degree of objectivity in the answers to these questions. The grounds for liberal rights imply that given the background facts I have outlined above, each person is best off, in the usual case, if she has the power to figure these things out for herself and if she has the power then to shape the contours of her social and material world to accord with those interests and the moral aims that she thinks ought to be pursued. Just as in the case with democratic rights, the idea behind liberal rights is that disagreement about matters of one’s well-being, about which

²⁰Because “an authority that fails to take the points of view of citizens into account runs afoul of powerful considerations of justice even when it acts on the basis of a correct view of what ought to be done” (236-237).

there are objective truths, is best met with an egalitarian distribution of power to individuals.²¹

The clearest way to see the problem with Christiano's use of truth is his statement that all citizens have a fundamental "interest in truth" (e.g. 176), or in "learning the truth about justice" (296). Although Christiano is explicit that the truth is only advanced by providing opportunities for reasoned argument and belief revision, he never distinguishes among what we might call different kinds or classes of truth. For Christiano, it makes little difference whether "the truth" is taken narrowly, encompassing facts of the matter about events in the world, or taken broadly, including claims about what the correct content of the concepts "justice" or "equality" might be.²² As a result, he stumbles when considering the objection of near-perfect brainwashing (181), because as long as the brainwashing results in the brainwashee having "a completely true, coherent, and desirable set of beliefs," it is very difficult for Christiano to conclude that such brainwashing would constitute a violation of freedom of conscience (he is forced to deny that perfect brainwashing is possible, either in principle (182), or in practice (184)). Because this assumption is one of the assumptions with which the objection begins, denying it appears to be question-begging and certainly obscures the full force of the objection.

Notice that Christiano's system does not require absolute truth to function. Indeed, because he assumes that the content of concepts like equality and the common good inevitably reflects the interests of those who propose them, we might expect him to take a pragmatist line regarding the background concept of truth. That he does not do this, but rather insists that there is a right answer (although it can never be appealed to in practice given what Christiano calls the "facts of disagreement"), is an indication of the

²¹We should pause to ask whether this argument makes sense on its own terms. To assume that we know (with a "fair degree of objectivity") how to make someone's life go well but will refrain from doing so because each person is "best off...if she has the power to figure these things out for herself" ought to indicate to Christiano that a necessary component of a life that "goes well" is precisely the autonomy that must be denied them if we are to make their life go well. Something is awry here.

²²These positions are known, respectively, as noncognitivism and cognitivism, and the dispute focuses on whether moral statements are truth-apt or not. See Hare 1952 for a fuller discussion.

tacit, unconscious character of the assumption that questions like “what is justice?” or “what is equality?” have right answers.

It is unclear what is to happen when Christiano’s citizens disagree about the content of the concept “public equality.” Christiano has told us that “society” should acknowledge and respect disagreement, but in the same breath has removed the content of both “justice” and “public equality” from the set of matters subject to democratic determination. Disagreement will be permitted (entirely for democratic purposes), but will not ever be able to change the background “right answer”. We are told that all legitimate invocations of the concept “justice” will be concerned with furthering “public equality” (78). This is to assert the priority of ethics over politics, in the sense that the ultimate rightness of Christiano’s ethical concepts cannot ever be affected by political action in any way whatsoever.²³

This example from procedural democratic theory shows how pervasive the “right answers” view is in contemporary political theory. If even the democratic theorists who aren’t committed to a view that democracy tends to track the right answers are themselves appealing to right answers, this view must be pervasive indeed. Another salient example is Estlund (2008). While it is beyond my scope to investigate this argument here, I think Estlund’s appeal to truth is undermined by the notion of a “qualified” objection, which resembles Christiano’s treatment insofar as it is a standard of debate which is not itself amenable to democratic disagreement.²⁴

To identify the strongest arguments for truth in politics, I will now turn to recent work in epistemic democracy: that is, work by democratic theorists who argue that “the aim of democracy is to track the truth” (Goodin and List 2001). We can expect that it is these theorists, more than any others, who will have articulated a careful, nuanced understanding of the connections between truth, contestation and democracy.

²³The subtle resurfacing of fundamentally religious themes in secular guises is a commonplace of twenty-first century political philosophy. Though the etiological supports have all been knocked away, many philosophers retain a vestigial affection for absolute certainty, even in cases (such as this one) where the absolutely certain truths are playing no role at all in the philosophical system.

²⁴However, Estlund’s work (2008:ch.2, see also Estlund 2011) treats the issues surrounding truth in politics more clearly and sensitively than any other work of contemporary political theory.

IV

Condorcet’s Jury Theorem (hereinafter CJT) has fascinated political theorists for decades, and has enjoyed particular popularity with two groups, “those drawn to elegant technical results and those convinced that the ability to get things right is crucial for justifications of democracy” (Pamuk 2020:598). Briefly, the theorem assumes a binary choice scenario with a correct (or “better”) answer, and states that as long as voters have “better than random” competence, hold independent opinions and vote sincerely, the probability that a majority will choose the correct answer approaches one as the number of voters approaches infinity (Condorcet 1785). The theorem is usually criticized on the grounds that its assumptions are unrealistic. While I share this view, I will here stipulate that the assumptions regarding voters are unproblematic, and will focus my attention on Condorcet’s assumption regarding the nature of political questions. Epistemic democrats who employ the CJT seldom excavate Condorcet’s reasons for assuming that a binary political choice might have a “right” or “better” answer. For example, Goodin and List (2001) devote a single sentence in their conclusion to this point: “Furthermore, all of them [the social decision rules they have been considering] are *good* truth-trackers—insofar, of course, as there are any “truths” for politics to track at all” (295). The authors then cite passages by Duncan Black and David Miller that, if true, appear as though they would impose a major scope condition on the paper’s central claims. The cited page of Miller (1992), for instance, contains the following passage:

I believe the epistemic conception sets an unrealistically high standard for political decision-making. Although occasionally a political community may have to decide on some question to which it is plausible to suppose a correct answer exists (say some scientific question in circumstances where there is complete consensus on the ends which the decision should serve), it is much more likely that the issue will concern competing claims which cannot all be met simultaneously in circumstances where no resolution of the competition can be deemed objectively right (55).²⁵

²⁵The authors also cite the following passage from Duncan Black’s venerable work on election theory: “Now whether there be much or little to be said in favour of a theory of juries arrived at in this way,

If this claim is true, then there is no sense in pursuing the CJT, because in the absence of an “objectively right” answer the CJT makes no predictions. Demonstrating that this claim is not true ought therefore to be a high priority for epistemic democrats. Yet Goodin and List are content merely to cite it and move on to a series of proofs, the utility of which is entirely contingent on Miller’s claim being false.²⁶ A division of labor in the social sciences is inevitable, and these particular authors devote much of their attention to demonstrating that the CJT can be generalized to a choice between more than two options. However, if the results in Goodin and List 2001 are to hold, it remains vital that one of these remaining answers can in some objective or absolute sense be characterized as “better” than all the others.

A fuller articulation of the CJT is given in a recent book (Goodin and Spiekermann 2018). Goodin and Spiekermann (2018) write that “without at least minimal competence, good government is impossible” (ibid:1). On their understanding, competence is a unitary, general attribute that enables public officials to make correct decisions.

The blunders of our governments derive from many sources. Evil intent is occasionally one of them. More often, however, government errors are owing more to a lack of due care and attention—misfeasance rather than malfeasance. Part and parcel of that is public officials simply not getting their facts right — a failure to reason properly from true facts to the logical conclusions. We should never underestimate the impact of sheer ignorance — crucial facts that were missing, dots that were not connected — in accounting for why public policies sometimes go so badly wrong (2).²⁷

there seems to be nothing in favour of a theory of elections that adopts this approach. When a judge, say, declares an accused person to be either guilty or innocent, it would be possible to conceive of a test which, in principle at least, would be capable of telling us whether his judgement had been right or wrong. But in the case of elections no such test is conceivable; and the phrase ‘the probability of the correctness of a voter’s opinion’ seems to be without definite meaning” (Black 1953:162). Goodin and List let this pass without comment.

²⁶It is unclear exactly where the burden of proof ought to lie here, and perhaps the authors have addressed this problem in other work, but I was surprised that they were content to claim only a contingent relevance for their impressive mathematical efforts, rather than establishing the relevance of their work in the actual world by showing that political questions are in fact as they assume them to be. Reliance on Condorcet’s own assumptions may be inhibiting fruitful research in this area.

²⁷Notice a latent ambiguity in this passage: the complaint seems to be at once that public officials mis-state the premises of reasoning (“public officials simply not getting their facts right”) and that they fail to reason from correctly-stated premises to the resulting conclusions (a failure to reason properly from true facts to the logical conclusions). The authors never disambiguate the two possibilities, so

The authors' views on competence emerge as a special case of their view of knowledge.

There is a lot of knowledge that is widely dispersed across a given society, and political decision-making and public policymaking would be improved, and errors avoided, if that dispersed knowledge were taken more systematically into account (ibid:2).

Goodin and Spiekermann would no doubt agree that it is impossible for policymakers to consider *all* knowledge when making a political decision. They would likely argue that only “relevant” knowledge ought to be considered. So what is relevant knowledge, in the context of a political decision? I suggest that a determination of “relevant” knowledge presupposes the ends in view, in the same way that the data collected for research are determined by the research goal. Extracting “relevant” knowledge from what has been called “the buzzing chaos of the universe”²⁸ requires a collection strategy, and this collection strategy, if it is to pick out a “relevant” subset of knowledge, must adopt a principle by which to determine relevance. I claim that it is impossible to distinguish relevant from irrelevant information without adopting hypotheses as to the question at issue, and that insofar as procedures for knowledge collection must be based on hypotheses, they can be neither systematic nor neutral.

This (widely-shared) understanding of knowledge collection undermines the authors' claims regarding competence. Recall that they understand competence to be a unitary attribute: a generalized capacity for “getting their facts right” and subsequently making good decisions (2). On the plausible understanding of knowledge that I've suggested, competence must depend to some extent on the ends in view. This tracks broader usage of the concept “competence”: we typically don't assert competence in a generalized way, but rather with reference to specific fields of activity (we might say that LeBron James is a competent basketball player, for example, without implying anything about his competence beyond that particular activity). Competence presupposes a goal or an objective, which the authors assume away.²⁹

we are left in the dark whether it is deficiencies in our premises or in our reasoning that leads to our public policies going “so badly wrong” (ibid:2).

²⁸Lerner 1972:259

²⁹A natural reply that Goodin and Spiekermann might make is that the sphere of competence they

The authors' views on knowledge and competence lead them to a rather bracing view of truth. They argue that "the truth is constant and singular, while error is multiple and random" (4).³⁰ It is this "truth" that applications of Condorcet's Jury Theorem are supposed to approximate. They write:

...our notion of correctness is flexible enough to accommodate any external standard, as long as the standard that is applied fixes exactly one alternative as the right one. In particular, a correct alternative can also be the 'better' alternative according to some independent standard of betterness (such as 'more nearly correct'), rather than the 'true' alternative in a more demanding sense of truth (18).

Goodin and Spiekermann cite as an example of this procedure the well-used tale of Galton's ox (Galton 1907) and the wisdom of crowds in determining its weight. Francis Galton, the English mathematician, wrote of his experience observing the annual show of the "West of England Fat Stock and Poultry Exhibition" (Galton 1907:450). To excavate the authors' example, I will introduce some of Galton's original article.

A weight-judging competition was carried on...A fat ox having been selected, competitors bought stamped and numbered cards...on which to inscribe their respective names, addresses, and estimates of what the ox would weigh after it had been slaughtered and "dressed." Those who guessed most successfully received prizes. About 800 tickets were issued...The judgments were unbiased by passion and uninfluenced by oratory and the like. The sixpenny fee deterred practical joking, and the hope of a prize and the joy of competition prompted each competitor to do his best. The competitors included butchers and farmers, some of whom were highly expert in judging the weight of cattle; others were probably guided by such information as they might pick up, and by their own fancies. The average competitor was probably as well fitted for making a just estimate of the dressed weight of the ox, as an average voter is of judging the merits of most political issues on which he votes, and the variety among the voters to judge justly was probably much the same in either case.

have in mind is *politics*. Discussions of politics as *techne* have ancient roots: *e.g.*, Plato, *Protagoras* 319e. I won't pursue this complicated question here, except to say that we may have reasons to suspect that politics is different from other fields of endeavor because it is a mechanism for accommodating conflicts of value.

³⁰Adopting the distinction made by Estlund and Landemore 2018, the authors cite their claim that "we wouldn't be exchanging reasons in the first place if we did not believe that there was something to figure out, whether we call this something the truth, the right, or the correct, just or socially useful answer" (12).

Now the middlemost [median] estimate is 1207 lb., and the weight of the dressed ox proved to be 1198 lb.; so the *vox populi* was in this case 9 lb., or 0.5 per cent. of the whole weight too high. The distribution of the estimates about their middlemost value was of the usual type, so far that they clustered closely in its neighbourhood and became rapidly more sparse as the distance from it increased...It appears then, in this particular instance, that the *vox populi* is correct to within 1 per cent. of the real value...This result is, I think, more creditable to the trustworthiness of a democratic judgment than might have been expected.

We see here the mathematical source of Condorcet's high hopes. Why not simply apply this excellent method to politics? If we assume that the method described above is applicable to questions of value, then our political choices will follow naturally from the (unique) correct view of morality, though we may need to bracket these correct answers as a democratic concession to the habitually incorrect. However, we may have some reasons to distinguish the choice situation in politics from Galton's bucolic competition. It goes without saying that politics deals at least in part with what I have called "contested" questions, where the standards of evaluation are themselves in dispute. As we saw, Galton's ox had a true weight, and it was by reference to this weight that candidate guesses were evaluated. Similarly, if the ethical or political "ox" has a true weight, all guesses as to that weight are *ex hypothesi* right or wrong by degrees. Christiano would probably endorse this move, as would many epistocratic political theorists. However, it seems very difficult to apply Galton's model to political questions. When the city council establishes a 4.3% rate of sales tax, for example, it ought to be possible, on this standard, to say whether it is more or less "correct" than rates of 4.2% or 4.4%. This seems impossible, but it's important to recognize that it seems impossible not just because we lack the knowledge that would enable us to properly make the determination, but rather because even if we had all the available knowledge, we'd still be faced with an irreducible conflict of values. Some groups will benefit, some groups will lose out, and we will have to decide on the basis of which values we prefer to see realized. For these reasons, I claim that to characterize most political compromises as "correct" or "incorrect" is a fruitless endeavor.

A more normative, Case 2 version of the question might ask “how much *ought* the ox to weigh?” This framing appears to capture the form of a “contested” political question. It’s difficult to imagine candidate answers converging on a value at all, and even if they were to converge, it’s unclear whether we would be justified in labelling that value the “true” normatively desirable weight, because in the case of ethical questions, we lack a method analogous to weighing the ox after all guesses have been made. As Ingham (2013) points out, we would need to find a way to objectively verify the normative consensus. But if we have access to such a method, why bother guessing in the first place? Why should we subject ourselves to the inconvenience of democratic politics if we have access to the “correct” procedure-independent standards?³¹ Recall that democracy is said by epistocrats to be a reliable mechanism for tracking “the truth”. If we cannot weigh the ethical ox, and therefore cannot verify the correctness propensity of the guesses, it is unclear why we ought to rely on the CJT at all.

If we *do* know the weight of the ethical ox, and therefore can know the correctness propensity of political proposals, it is unclear why we ought to embrace popular participation in politics. Assigning truth to value in this way is likely to undermine the case for democracy. If we assume the existence of right answers to normative or ethical questions, it’s unclear whether democratic politics would be the best method of arriving at them (that is, whether it would be the best “truth tracker”). Why not permit only “competent” voters to cast ballots? Condorcet’s Jury Theorem relies on the law of large numbers (Goodin and Spiekermann 2018:29), not on broad participation - we can get a sufficiently large population to achieve “epistemic certainty” with just a few hundred voters (ibid:22). Why not simply empanel the competent and call it a day?³²

³¹Observers have rightly pointed out that because the epistemic benefits claimed by Goodin and Spiekermann are mostly exhausted by an electorate of, say, ten thousand voters, they hardly serve to ground a theory of democracy (Pamuk 2020:598). The CJT relies on the law of large numbers, so augmentations beyond this level have a nugatory effect on the “correctness propensity” of democratic decisions.

³²Goodin and Spiekermann have a response to the assertion that political questions involve values impervious to assignments of truth or falsehood, wherein they argue that “truth” (following Estlund and Landemore 2018) is just truth about preferences. On this view, the “truth” that the CJT is uncovering is simply the truth that a majority or plurality prefers one option over another (41-43). So interpreted, the CJT becomes a tautology: on the basis of a group preference for option x, we conclude

It is open to Goodin and Spiekermann to reply that their framework presupposes only that some decisions are better than others, and that a “correct” answer is simply an answer that is agreed to be “better” than other available answers. However, to make this reply the authors would be forced to articulate a set of “best” standards by which this “best” answer is to be identified. In light of this reply, they would be forced to revise the competence assumption: instead of a propensity for “getting it right,” competence would now imply a propensity for “getting it right according to the best standards,” and the competence assumption would imply (per the CJT) that as long as the assumptions hold, the average voter is more likely than not to vote for the option that is “best” according to the “best” standards. Because voters evaluate political decisions according to a variety of standards and criteria, I find the assumption that they would tend to do this in accordance with the “best” standards to be somewhat shaky, and I therefore consider this line of reply unpromising.³³

A more plausible understanding of the sense in which some answers are “truer” or “better” than others is that they occur within a particular paradigm, perhaps one so dominant and widely shared that it fades into the background, leading those who work within it to see it either as the only possible way of looking at the world, or as the only ethically permissible one. When we speak of correct answers to political questions, it seems that we are necessarily speaking from within a particular paradigm, and with respect to some particular objective. To extract a correct answer from the paradigm through which it was arrived at, and hold it out as “correct” irrespective of paradigm or the purposes for which it was proposed in the first place, would be an error. It seems likely that the assertion of a paradigm-independent fact of the matter regarding contested political questions is really just an assertion of the superiority of one’s own paradigm. We might call this error “epistemic solipsism,” in the sense that it asserts that the speaker’s epistemic paradigm is in fact the only one.

that option x is preferred by the group. Because the “truth” so uncovered is trivial, it’s not clear why we should bother using the CJT to uncover it.

³³My thanks to Sean Ingham for suggesting this reply on the authors’ behalf.

V

Political theorists of the twentieth century were more attentive to the ominous implications of the identification of political truth. Joseph Raz argued that morality underdetermines political action, in the sense that there are many plausible political compromises that meet the standards of morality, and that as a result, reasoning from morality to political action will provide an indeterminate guide to behavior (Raz 1998). Jon Elster thought that our political beliefs themselves are often indeterminate, since most political choice situations occur under conditions of strategic interaction, and that there is thus “no basis...for rational belief formation, and hence no firm basis for action” (Elster 1989:33-34).

Prior theorists also recognized the uncomfortable tension between experts and the democratic process. Hannah Arendt suggested that “truthtellers” such as scientists ought not to simultaneously pursue the truth and articulate what should be done about it, given the “despotic” character of claims to truth.³⁴

Seen from the viewpoint of politics, truth has a despotic character. It is therefore hated by tyrants, who rightly fear the competition of a coercive force they cannot monopolize, and it enjoys a rather precarious status in the eyes of governments that rest on consent and abhor coercion...The trouble is that factual truth, like all other truth, peremptorily claims to be acknowledged and precludes debate, and debate constitutes the very essence of political life. The modes of thought and communication that deal with truth, if seen from the political perspective, are necessarily domineering; they don't take into account other people's opinions, and taking these into account is the hallmark of all strictly political thinking (Arendt 1967).

Similarly, the philosopher Bernard Williams suggested that “just as there is no characterization of *the truth* which is both non-trivial and totally general, there is no general and non-trivial account of *finding the truth* or *method which favours finding the truth*...effective methods of discovering or transmitting the truth will vary with the kinds of truth in question (Williams 2005:154-5).

³⁴For a similar but more recent version of this claim, see the discussion of critical sociology in Boltanski and Thévenot 2006.

In the spirit of these theorists, I have tried to show that contested, Case 2 political questions (those involving dispute as to the objective to be sought or the paradigm through which it is to be achieved) are not helpfully thought of as having right answers. This is because the contested nature of such questions indicates that at least some non-trivial portion of the political unit would disagree with any right-wrong framing that could be suggested. To assert right answers to Case 2 questions in spite of this fundamental contestation is to unwarrantedly suppress political disagreement by implicitly asserting the primacy of one's own paradigm. The "right answers" view situates the content of ethics outside politics, and makes the rightness or wrongness of political decisions a function of principles that are not themselves subject to debate and discussion. It is difficult to see how such a view can be called democratic.

Instead, I have argued that contestation should be expected, and that while we can decompose contested political questions into subsidiary elements, some irreducible amount of contestation will remain. This irreducible contestation will be largest under conditions of dissensus and polarization, and smallest under conditions of consensus and homogeneity, but it will exist in any democratic political system. Disputes over values are a sign of dynamism, not error, because they reveal that a political society is sublimating the violent impulses emerging from such disagreements within a political process bound by rules and norms of behavior, rather than resorting to the reserve option of violence and war. The eternal rightness of right answers is sinister, whether they are Plato's or Christiano's, and we should be especially cautious in cases where we agree with them.³⁵

To determine the legitimate role of experts in a democratic polity, this article suggested that we should examine the types of political questions that democracies must decide. The ensuing investigation revealed at least three conceptual possibilities for political questions, two of which appear to be widespread. I observed that the legitimate role of experts in a given democratic society will likely vary with that society's degree of consensus on objectives and paradigms. I also noted at least two senses in which

³⁵"The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right." (Hand 1944).

political outcomes may be said to be correct and incorrect, one relating to achievement of the agreed end through the agreed paradigm, and another relating to the correspondence between the end so achieved and the requirements of justice. I suggested that failure to recognize these distinct senses in which a political decision can be “correct” poses deep problems for contemporary political theory, and I demonstrated these problems with reference to both procedural and epistocratic democratic theory. Because the “right answers” view cannot actually weigh the “ethical ox” to the satisfaction of all, I showed that there is a disanalogy between the aggregation of individual expertise and the circumstances of politics, such that we should be wary of the straightforward application of mechanisms for expertise aggregation (such as the CJT) to democratic politics, which, as I showed, must deal to some extent with contested questions of value, to which no right answers can be said to exist.

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