

Populism, Expertise, and Intellectual Autonomy

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Populism, as I shall understand the term here, is a style of political rhetoric that posits a Manichean conflict between the people and corrupt elites. In the present decade, populism has played a particularly salient role in the politics of the United States and Europe. Moreover, populism is commonly associated with a kind of skepticism about expertise, on which the opinions of non-experts are preferred to any expert consensus. Thus, Kirk Hawkins and Levente Littay (2019) note that populism ascribes “greater legitimacy to the opinions of “ordinary” citizens,” (p. 8) and Jan-Werner Müller (2016) notes that many populist voters “pride themselves on doing their own thinking (even their own research) about the political situation” (p. 15) and observes that one populist politician, Victor Orbán, “equates the correct policy with what common sense can easily discern.” (p. 26; cf. Nichols 2019, p. 219) In light of all this, populist expertise skepticism appears to be a kind of pathology of excessive intellectual autonomy. I shall argue, however, that this connection between populism and intellectual autonomy is mere appearance: populist expertise skepticism does not involve excessive intellectual autonomy, because it does not involve a disposition for non-deferential belief, but rather a disposition for deference to “alternative” sources of information. Populist expertise skepticism is not about whether or not you are deferential when forming your beliefs, but rather about to whom you defer when you form your beliefs.

Populism

Populist rhetoric requires a claim to represent “the people,” understood as unified and uniquely morally virtuous, against the elites (or members of “the establishment”), understood as parties to a morally vicious conspiracy against “the will of the people.”¹ Populism, thus understood, fundamentally contrasts with pluralism, which, as Hawkins and Littay (2019) put it, “accepts differences of opinion as inevitable and avoids labeling opponents as enemies.” (p. 9) Populist politicians and parties, as Müller (2016) puts it, “claim that they and only they represent the true people.” (p. 40; cf. p. 101) Pluralism posits disagreement among the people, understood as a plurality of individuals, whereas populism posits “the people” as a unified and homogenous entity, not subject to internal difference of opinion. For this reason, as Müller argues, populists:

always exclude others at two levels: at the level of party politics they claim to be the only legitimate representatives of the people and hence all others are morally excluded; and ... at the level of ... the people themselves, those who do not conform to the populists’ symbolic construction of the “real people” are also shut out. (p. 106)

This has an epistemological corollary, in the form of a kind of infallibilist dogmatism. Here, again, is Müller (2016):

If there is only one common good and only one way to represent it faithfully (as opposed to a self-consciously partisan but also self-consciously fallible interpretation of what the

¹ Müller 2016, pp. 19-20, Hawkins and Littay 2019, p. 1, pp. 8-9.

common good might be), then disagreement within the party that claims to be the sole legitimate representative of the common good obviously cannot be permissible. (p. 36)

Thus, pluralists “make representative claims in the form of something like hypotheses that can be empirically disproven on the basis of the actual results of regular procedures and institutions like elections,” which claims are “self-limiting and ... conceived of as fallible.” (p. 39)² Populists’ representative claims are, by contrast, “of a moral and symbolic – not an empirical – nature.” (ibid.) This explains why populists are both vehemently democratic in their rhetoric whilst being disposed to dispute the legitimacy of unsuccessful elections.

The fact that populism is anti-elitist explains why populism is sometimes associated with certain policies, such as economic statism or restricting immigration. The reason is that, in the relevant cases, populists opposed elites among whom the rejection of said policies was orthodox. In Latin America in the 70s and 80s, socialist populists oppose neoliberal establishment parties that rejected protectionism and other market interventions; in Europe today, anti-immigration populists oppose moderate establishment parties that are more liberal on immigration. The relative hegemony of economic and political liberalism since World War II creates the appearance that populism, which is essentially anti-elitist, is also essentially anti-liberal. However, as Hawkins and Littvay (2019) argue, “newer waves of populism appeared in the 1990s promoting market-oriented economic reforms, especially in Latin America.” (p. 7) A related point is that populism is compatible with both left-wing and right-wing political ideologies. Populism requires demonizing the elite, but this is compatible with viewing the elite as “an economic elite constituted by wealthy business owners” or with viewing the elite as “a cultural and political class constituted by the traditional politicians and their intellectual allies.” (p. 8) In the contemporary US context, Bernie Sanders is a populist of the former kind, while Donald Trump a populist of the latter kind.

Populist expertise skepticism

In *The Death of Expertise* (2019), Tom Nichols describes a general tendency in American culture on which expert consensus is ignored or rejected in favor of individual’s amateur opinions. But he associates this tendency with populism:

[T]here is an undeniable political dimension here, with the death of expertise helping to fuel a kind of resentful, angry populism in the early 21st century that had made its way into the civic life of the world’s democracies. (p. xiii)

Setting aside the question of whether expertise skepticism is among the causes of populism – or whether it is perhaps the other way around – I think Nichols is right that populism *involves* a kind of expertise skepticism: a disposition to prefer non-expert opinion to expert consensus. (There is reason to think that “expertise skepticism” is a misleading name for this phenomenon; I’ll return to that point, below.)

Now, expertise skepticism can seem, at first glance, incoherent. The British politician Michael Gove was ridiculed for saying that the British people “have had enough of experts.” This seems incoherent, if an expert is necessarily a reliable source of information. Certainly, “expert” sometimes has that meaning.

² Müller here imagines the pluralist rejecting the second conjunct of the claim that there is only one common good and only one way to represent it faithfully. We can also imagine a pluralism that rejects the first conjunct, in favor of a kind of subjectivism about the good.

Nichols, for example, defines experts as “people who know considerably more on a subject than the rest of us,” and thus “those to whom we turn when we need advice, education, or solutions in a particular area of human knowledge.” (p. 29) Likewise, Alvin Goldman (2001) defines “experts in a given domain” (in the objective sense; see below) as those who “have more beliefs (or high degrees of belief) in true propositions and/or fewer beliefs in false propositions within that domain than most people do (or better: than the vast majority of people do).” (p. 91) It would be incoherent, I think, to suggest that you ought not to defer to someone more knowledgeable or more reliable than you are – at least if we have “epistemic” obligation, with its essential truth connection, in mind. However, this is not the sense of “expert” that Gove was employing. The context of the ridiculed sound bite makes this clear:

I think people in this country have had enough of experts with organizations with acronyms saying that they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong. Because these people are the same ones who got consistently wrong [at which point Gove is interrupted by the interviewer]³

An expert, in Gove’s sense, can be consistently wrong, and, it seems clear, can be *less* knowledgeable than the rest of us and *less* reliable than the vast majority of people. An expert, in Gove’s sense, is something like someone with expert credentials, someone with official or institutional status as an expert, or what Goldman (2001) calls a “reputational expert,” namely, “someone widely believed to be an expert (in the objective sense), whether or not he really is one.” (p. 91)

Gove is not alone in using “expert” in this way. Ben Sasse, the junior US Senator from Nebraska, has this to say against experts in 2016:

The way for conservatives to approach the public is to first ask people, ‘How do you think problems get solved? Is it by putting power in the hands of experts who have the answers or is it by putting resources in the hands of people who need solutions?’⁴

Here, experts – even experts “who have the answers”! – are understood as less trustworthy than non-experts.

Even if expertise skepticism is coherent, it may still be badly mistaken. Whether expertise skepticism is mistaken, however, is a matter of whether its claims of unreliability are true. Are the “experts with organizations with acronyms” really less reliable than ordinary Britons? Are the academics, professionals, and civil servants who “have the answers” really less reliable than laypeople who “need solutions”? In general, are our reputational experts not, after all, really experts?

Although populism involves a kind of expertise skepticism, I am going to assume that expertise skepticism is not essentially populist. Some of the central examples in Nichols’ (2019) discussion, for example, do not seem to involve politics in any straightforward way: patients contesting their doctors’ prescriptions, for example, or flat-earth conspiracy theories. That is not to deny the extent to which expertise skepticism may overlap with populism. The anti-vaccine movement, climate change skepticism, and opposition to GMO foods – none of these are explicitly political in their content, but each

³ June 3rd, 2016, interview with Faisal Islam, Sky News.

⁴ Malone 2016.

is recognizably populist in orientation. Explicitly political conspiracy theories, of course, like 9/11 Truth or the Birther movement, are also clear examples of populism.

Thus, it will be *populist* expertise skepticism that I will focus on here. More examples will follow, but Gove's rhetoric on Brexit can serve as our paradigm. The now-familiar idea is simply this: leading up to the referendum, experts generally agreed that there would be various negative economic consequences were the United Kingdom to leave the European Union; Gove and the Leave campaign urged voters to reject this and to believe that leaving the EU would not have said negative economic consequences. Their success at the polls suggests that many voters took up their suggestion.

Intellectual autonomy

Contemporary expertise skepticism, and populist expertise skepticism in particular, seems to involve intellectual autonomy. Indeed, this association with intellectual autonomy is part of the articulation of populism. In the interview mentioned above, Gove said, "I'm not asking the public to trust me; I'm asking the public to trust themselves." "Intellectual autonomy," in the present sense, is a disposition for non-deferential belief: intellectual autonomy is manifested by "thinking for yourself" or "making up your own mind," where this contrasts with deferring to others. The paradigm case of deferential belief is testimonial belief, i.e. believing that p on the basis of the fact that someone tells you that p. We began, above, with the idea that populists are distinctively intellectually autonomous: rather than simply believing what they are told, they figure things out for themselves, either by conducting their own research or by perceiving what is evident to uncorrupted common sense.⁵

For our purposes here, this connection between intellectual autonomy and non-deferential belief can be treated as a stipulation.⁶ The present point then is just that populist expertise skepticism seems to involve a disposition for non-deferential belief. However, I think this connection between intellectual autonomy and non-deferential belief has deep roots in the history of Enlightenment thought. Here is Kant:

*Enlightenment is the human being's emergence from his self-incurred minority. Minority is the inability to make use of one's own understanding without direction from another. This minority is self-incurred when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapere aude! Have courage to make use of your own understanding! is thus the motto of enlightenment.*⁷

What I take Kant to mean here is that there is something noble and courageous about non-deferential belief – when we defer to others, we allow ourselves to be directed by them, and to that extent make use of their faculty of understanding, rather than our own. And Locke makes deference sound downright creepy:

⁵ See also Nichols 2019, p. 219.

⁶ And thus compatible with the idea that deferential belief might manifest a kind of intellectual autonomy (Zagzebski 2012; cf. Zagzebski 2013).

⁷ "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?," at p. 17 in Kant 1784/1996 (trans. M.J. Gregor).

I think we may as rationally hope to see with other men's eyes, as to know by other men's understandings. So much as we ourselves consider and comprehend of truth and reason, so much we possess of real and true knowledge. The floating of other men's opinions in our brains makes us not one jot the more knowing, though they happen to be true.⁸

Finally, Elizabeth Fricker (2006) articulates the ideal of intellectual autonomy like this:

A superior being, one who lacked our cognitive limitations, and could do all the work herself, in finding out about the universe, could be epistemically autonomous in a way that no one of us, with our limited research time and capacities, is able to be. She would not need to take anything on trust from another's word, because she would have the epistemic power to check up, to find out for herself about everything she wanted to know, without reliance on others. (p. 240)

I said that populist expertise skepticism seems to involve intellectual autonomy. However, a critic of populism might object: intellectual autonomy is an intellectual virtue; populist expertise skepticism is far from intellectually virtuous; therefore, populist expertise skepticism does not involve intellectual autonomy. There is something right about this argument. But it does not really threaten the idea that populist expertise skepticism involves intellectual autonomy. To see why, we need to distinguish between two different ways in which the term "intellectual autonomy" can be used.

"Intellectual autonomy" is used as a *virtue term* when it is used as the name of a virtue – the virtue of intellectual autonomy. When used in this way, it is a conceptual truth that intellectual autonomy is a virtue, and we cannot coherently ask whether intellectual autonomy is a virtue. "Intellectual autonomy" is used as a *trait term* when it is used as the name of some trait – the trait of intellectual autonomy. When it is used in this way, it is a conceptually open question whether intellectual autonomy is a virtue, and we can coherently ask whether intellectual autonomy is a virtue. In this sense, virtue terms are essentially normative in a way that trait terms are not. The same distinction applies to other terms that can be used as the name of a virtue – "courage," "humility," "magnanimity," and so on.

On an Aristotelian conception of the virtues, the relationship between virtues and traits is relatively straightforward. On this conception, a virtue is an excellence in a particular activity, i.e. a disposition to ϕ at the right time and in the right way. For each *virtue*, which names a disposition to ϕ at the right time and in the right way, there is a corresponding *trait*, which names merely a disposition to ϕ . But that virtue and that trait will have the same name. "Courage," for example, can be used to name (roughly) a disposition to expose oneself to danger at the right time and in the right way, but it can also be used to name (roughly) merely a disposition to expose oneself to danger. That is why we can describe the person who foolishly charges into battle at the wrong time and in the wrong way both as excessively courageous (where "courage" is used as a trait term) and as not really courageous (where "courage" is used as a virtue term).

Back to our critic, who argues that populist expertise skepticism cannot involve intellectual autonomy, because populist expertise skepticism is not intellectually virtuous. This argument clearly uses

⁸ *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, I.iii.23.

“intellectual autonomy” as a virtue term. And it is sound, so understood. However, the claim that populist expertise skepticism involves intellectual autonomy, for this reason, can only be charitably understood as using “intellectual autonomy” as a trait term. Adopting the Aristotelian construction, the virtue of intellectual autonomy is a disposition to believe non-deferentially at the right time and in the right way, while the trait of intellectual autonomy is merely a disposition to believe non-deferentially. Let us grant, for the sake of argument, that populist expertise skepticism does not involve a disposition to believe non-deferentially at the right time and in the right way. The most charitable reading of the claim that populist expertise skepticism involves intellectual autonomy, then, takes “intellectual autonomy” to refer to the trait of intellectual autonomy. In other words, the claim is best understood as the claim that populist expertise skepticism involves a disposition to believe non-deferentially.

Or, better: populist expertise skepticism involves certain dispositions to believe non-deferentially, and in particular certain dispositions to believe non-deferentially *despite the existence of expert consensus*.

When “intellectual autonomy” is used as a trait term, we can make sense of the idea, mentioned at the outset, that populist expertise skepticism involves a pathological excess of intellectual autonomy. When it is used as a virtue term, however, this doesn’t make sense: there is no such thing as a pathological excess of any virtue. Moreover, when “intellectual autonomy” is used as a trait term, the question of the status of intellectual autonomy – whether and to what extent it is a good thing – can coherently be asked. Only if “intellectual autonomy” is used as a trait term does it make sense to argue that intellectual autonomy entails a vicious form of egoism.⁹ And, less obviously, only if “intellectual autonomy” is a trait term does it make sense to *argue* – rather than to presuppose – that intellectual autonomy is a virtue.¹⁰

Populist expertise skepticism as a species of deferential disposition

I have interpreted the claim that populist expertise skepticism involves intellectual autonomy as the claim that populist expertise skepticism involves certain dispositions to believe non-deferentially. However, even so interpreted, the claim is false. Populist expertise skepticism does not involve dispositions to believe non-deferentially, but rather dispositions to defer to “alternative” sources of information, i.e. sources of information other than expert testimony.¹¹ I have three kinds of cases in mind.

First, populist expertise skepticism is often manifested in deference to politicians when they make assertions that are contrary to expert consensus. The websites of fact-checking organizations¹² are populated by such claims. Right-wing populist politicians, for one example, regularly ignore or reject expert consensus on legal and illegal immigration figures, on correlations between illegal immigration and crime, and on the economic effects of legal and illegal immigration. In a speech on January 8th, 2019, Donald Trump told his audience that “20,000 migrant children were illegally brought into the United States” in the previous month, but Factcheck.org found that “there’s no evidence for that in available statistics.” (Kiely 2019) Left-wing populist politicians, for another example, regularly ignore or reject

⁹ Foley 1994, 2001, p. 86 and passim, Zagzebski 2007, 2012, pp. 52-5.

¹⁰ Cf. Hazlett 2016.

¹¹ What follows expands on discussions of the skepticism of conspiracy theorists in Hazlett 2019 and of amateurism in Hazlett forthcoming.

¹² <https://www.politifact.com/>, <https://www.snopes.com/>, <https://www.factcheck.org>, <https://apnews.com/APFactCheck>

expert consensus on the extent of income inequality, on government spending and budgetary matters, and on the estimated costs of their economic policies. In August of 2019 CNN reported that Bernie Sanders has been making “the same false claim about health spending for 10 years,” namely, that the United States spends more on health care than any other country (Dale 2019). Supporters of populist politicians receive this information sympathetically through social media posts and traditional advertising. Yes, they are skeptical of experts – but their skepticism is manifested in a particular pattern of deference, namely, deference to the aforementioned politicians.

Second, populist expertise skepticism is often manifested in deference to anti-establishment opinion leaders who disagree with the expert consensus – “non-mainstream” analysts and commentators, conspiracy theorists, “rogue” academics, non-academics marginalized by the academy, and the like. There are a few identifiable themes here. One is the violation of disciplinary boundaries. Academics who present themselves as free-thinking critics of orthodoxy – think of Sam Harris, Jordan Petersen, Steven Pinker – are in the business of commenting on topics outside their areas of academic expertise.¹³ This is something like an essential feature for “TED” talks – a chemist has figured out how to write poetry, a geneticist knows the meaning of life, a neuroscientist has figured out how to make the best soufflé. Being a scientist – as opposed to a humanist – is a kind of credential here, but ideally not a scientist trained in the relevant scientific field – think here of the prominent climate change skeptic Willie Soon, whose training is in aerospace engineering and whose primary research is in astrophysics. The violation of disciplinary boundaries is presented as indicative of heroic virtue and magisterial omnipotence – thus the economist Steven Levitt, even when discussing matters about which he is squarely an expert, markets himself as a “rogue economist” who can uncover “the hidden side of everything.”¹⁴

Another (related) theme is that, for anti-establishment opinion leaders, the lack of credentials is a kind of credential. It is no objection to anti-establishment opinion leaders that they lack the academic credentials of the experts with whom they disagree, but rather a sign that they are not part of the corrupt academic elite. In connection with this, positions that are held by a minority of experts or which violate some long-standing paradigm are perceived to be particularly credible. For example, “modern monetary theory,” on which government spending need not be funded through taxation or borrowing, and the plausibility of which is beyond any layperson, is appealing to left-wing populists precisely because it is rejected by the majority of economists, who are perceived to be part of a corrupt, neoliberal elite.

A final theme for anti-establishment opinion leaders is the appeal of individual genius. In the kind of cases I have in mind, populist expertise skepticism involves deferring to some one (usually charismatic) person, or to some small group of people, rather than to expert consensus, which represents a much larger (anonymous) group of people. This relates back to the idea of uncorrupted common sense: populist expertise skepticism always involves a conviction that the truth can be gotten at by an individual working alone, so long as they are sufficiently liberated from the establishment. The promise of the method of consensus – and of the scientific method, in particular – is that collective inquiry – at least on certain topics – is far more reliable than individual inquiry. The logic of populist expertise skepticism rejects

¹³ Cf. Ballantyne 2019.

¹⁴ Note that the non-establishment opinion leaders to which populist expertise skeptics defer need not themselves be populists, and may even be critics of populism.

this: an individual free-thinking contrarian is more trustworthy than a homogeneous mass of like-minded eggheads. Summing up: again, I want to concede that populists are skeptical of experts, but insist that their skepticism is manifested in a particular pattern of deference, namely, deference to anti-establishment opinion leaders.

Third, populist expertise skepticism is often manifested in deference to “non-mainstream” news media, including, in particular, hyper-partisan news media – think of *Breitbart News*, the *Huffington Post*, *Blaze*, the *Drudge Report*. I want to grant a distinction, of which you might be skeptical, between “mainstream” and “non-mainstream” news media – although the boundary between these two things is surely a fuzzy one.¹⁵ My point is only that, as species of news media, these are sources of information to which consumers defer. The difference between consuming “mainstream” and “non-mainstream” news media is not the extent to which you are deferential, but, as it were, the content of your deference – it is not a question of whether the beliefs you form are deferential, but merely of to whom you defer in forming them. So, again, populists are skeptical of experts, but their skepticism is manifested in a particular pattern of deference, namely, deference to “non-mainstream” news media.

One important piece of evidence that populist expertise skepticism does not actually involve intellectual autonomy is that the relevant questions do not seem like the kinds of questions that could be addressed through individual inquiry. Whether illegal immigration causes crime is just not the kind of thing that most individuals could reasonably figure out on their own. This is a complex question requiring mountains of sociological and criminological evidence, statistical analysis, and various forms of disciplinary expertise. It would be absurd for a layperson to attempt to come to a conclusion about this matter *a priori*. And although populist politicians sometimes *say* that social and political problems can be solved merely by turning to folk wisdom and common sense, what ordinary people inclined towards populism actually *do* is not to conduct their own research, but defer to alternative sources of information.

It deserves to be mentioned, in this context, that there *are* politically important questions that can be addressed through individual inquiry. Questions about the morality of particular actions or practices (e.g. abortion), for example, or questions about the relative weight that ought to be given to competing values (e.g. security vs. freedom). It makes sense for a person to reflect and reason about such questions, or at least about aspects of such questions, on their own – to conduct their own moral research, as it were, without deferring to experts. Of course, this point is clearly closely connected to our sense that there are no moral experts – we struggle to understand what it would even mean for there to be an expert consensus about the morality of abortion or the relative importance of security and freedom.

Alternative experts

We’re now in a position to return to something I mentioned, above: that “expertise skepticism” may be a misleading name for the phenomenon we are talking about. I described expertise skepticism as a disposition to prefer non-expert opinion to expert consensus. But you might think that, in as much as you defer to someone (about whether p), you are thereby treating them as an expert (about whether p), such that so-called “expertise skepticism” would be better described as a disposition to defer to heterodox or non-standard experts – to *alternative experts*. Alternative experts, in this sense, are not reputational experts, and indeed are distinguished by their *not* being reputational experts. But nor are they necessarily

¹⁵ For further discussion, see Atton 2002, 2015, Kenix 2011, Rauch 2007, Holt 2018.

genuine experts, in the sense of being relatively reliable in a given domain, although they may be. They are “experts” in the sense that they are treated *as* experts by their adherents. The “expertise skeptic” is not so much skeptical of expertise, but of those standardly or traditionally taken to be experts. In this vein, Müller (2016) writes, of Gove’s famous remark, that “[t]he irony was that Gove himself clearly had the authority of an expert: he has always been seen as an intellectual among Tories.” (p. 108; cf. p. 30) However, I think we have sufficiently cleared this up by distinguishing between experts and reputational experts. Expertise skepticism, if you like, is really skepticism about reputational expertise, not skepticism about expertise proper. But “expertise skepticism” remains a fitting name for it, so long as this clarification is kept in mind.

Deferring to alternative experts is attractive because of its superficial resemblance to genuine intellectual autonomy. Intellectual autonomy is attractive because it involves freedom, independence, and self-reliance. Deference to alternative experts at first glance appears to involve the same things, because it involves ignoring or rejecting deference to reputational experts. But this is mere appearance: expertise skeptics are free from and independent of reputational experts, but they are guided by and dependent on alternative experts. They rely not on themselves, as the intellectually autonomous person does, but merely sources ignored or rejected by the majority.

Formal vs. substantive diagnoses of populism

Before concluding this discussion, I want to explain one broader lesson that I believe is suggested by my argument. I have argued that populist expertise skepticism does not involve intellectual autonomy. A corollary of this is that populist expertise skepticism does not involve *excessive* intellectual autonomy. The idea that populist expertise skepticism involves excessive intellectual autonomy, were it true, would provide what I am going to call a “formal” diagnosis of populism, facilitating a certain kind of critique of populism, as opposed to what I am going to call a “substantive” diagnosis of populism, facilitating a different kind of critique. Let me explain what I mean here.

The best way to get at what I have in mind is with an unrelated example. In his book *In Praise of Reason* (2012), Michael Lynch argues that “[s]cientific principles of inquiry have certain features that lend them a distinctively open character.” (p. 90) For example, scientific inquiry is “intersubjective,” in the sense that “[t]he success of a scientific investigation . . . is not judged by any one person or set of persons but by a larger public or group.” (p. 90-1) For another, scientific inquiry is “transparent,” in the sense that the norms of scientific inquiry require that the details of scientific research be publicly articulated and shared (pp. 91-2). Lynch compares the openness of scientific inquiry with certain religious methods:

Compare the method of divine revelation or the practice of consulting the Bible to learn about the origin of the planet. Putting aside whether these methods are in fact reliable, it is clear that neither is as intersubjective or transparent as the scientific method. [These methods] aren’t open to public adjudication in the way that scientific methods are. (p. 93)

Lynch’s diagnosis of scientific inquiry, as opposed to certain religious methods, is “formal,” in my sense. It appeals, not to the content of any particular scientific theory or theories, nor to the assumptions or presuppositions built into the scientific methods, but to the abstract structure or form of scientific inquiry. By contrast, consider the idea that scientific inquiry presupposes a kind of naturalism, on which everything that exists is in spacetime, by contrast with various religious methods of inquiry, which

presuppose the negation of naturalism, by allowing for the existence of non-spatiotemporal beings. That would be a “substantive” diagnosis, in my jargon, appealing not to the form of scientific inquiry, but to its content – in this case, what it presupposes.¹⁶

A diagnosis of populism in terms of intellectual autonomy, on which populist expertise skepticism involves intellectual autonomy, would be a formal diagnosis. This is because degree of intellectual autonomy is a formal matter. To describe someone as more or less intellectually autonomous is to describe the *manner* in which their beliefs are formed, whether non-deferentially or deferentially, and does not describe the *content* of their beliefs. If we could say that populist expertise skepticism involves excessive intellectual autonomy, we would have a critique of populism based on its form, rather than its content. But this is something, I have argued, we cannot say.¹⁷

The failure of one formal diagnosis of populism does not mean that other formal diagnoses will fail. However, I think it should at least make us sympathetic to the possibility that what distinguishes populism from non-populism, which might serve as the basis of a critique of populism, is its content, rather than its form. Two sorts of “content” seem relevant here. First, although populism “differs from traditional ideologies such as liberalism, conservatism, and socialism,” it is nevertheless an ideology, in the sense of being committed to certain ideas – populists represent the world in a distinctive way, such that it makes sense to speak of a populist “worldview” or “picture of the world.” Recall that populism posits “a Manichean cosmology that sees the side of good (the will of the people) arrayed against a knowing, agential evil – in this case, the elite,” (Hawkins and Littvay, p. 8) which necessitates the rejection of pluralism (as we saw, above). The critic of populism might do better to simply argue that this Manichean cosmology is *false*, and set aside the question of whether populism involves some formally-defined intellectual vice, like excessive intellectual autonomy. Second, although populism cannot be defined in terms of any particular policy positions, populists do articulate policy positions and enact policies – left-wing populists favor protectionism; right-wing populists are immigration hawks. The critic of populism – or perhaps, better, the critic of some particular instance of populism – might do better to simply argue that these policies are *wrong*, and set aside the question of whether populism involves some formally-defined intellectual vice.

Conclusion

I have argued that populism, although it is rightly associated with a kind of expertise skepticism, should not be associated with intellectual autonomy. At most, populism involves rhetorical articulations of the value of intellectual autonomy. But these articulations are insincere, in as much as populist expertise skepticism is a species of deferential disposition. A critique of populism that emphasizes deference as against non-deference will fail to engage the distinctive feature of populist expertise skepticism: deference to alternative experts.

¹⁶ It goes without saying that this leaves open whether Lynch is right about this alleged difference between science inquiry and religious methods. One can at least imagine, I think, an intersubjective and transparent version of scriptural interpretation that would be no less open than actual scientific investigation.

¹⁷ Likewise, we cannot plausibly argue that populism is distinguished by the *virtue* of intellectual autonomy, since it is not distinguished by patterns of deference or non-deference.

Populist expertise skepticism is not characterized by any particular degree or kind of intellectual autonomy. It is characterized, on the contrary, by a particular stance of opposition to journalistic, academic, and government institutions. Moreover, I would suggest that such opposition is more affective than cognitive. Deference to alternative experts is a way of expressing your dislike of the mainstream media and professional journalists, of academics and institutions of higher education, and of civil servants and government bureaucracy. Expertise skepticism ought to be considered as such, as an essentially affective phenomenon, as an expression of anger, frustration, or betrayal, directed at these institutions. Although expertise skepticism involves a lack of trust in these institutions, it is the affective element of trust that deserves our attention here: to be an expertise skeptic is less to lose your intellectual confidence in the reliability of these institutions, and more to become increasingly hostile towards them and to perceive them as increasingly hostile towards you. It is a breakdown of affection and goodwill more than an breakdown of evidence and credibility. This suggests that responses to populist expertise skepticism that emphasize overwhelming evidence of the reliability of traditional institutions may be missing the mark.

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