Do not copy or duplicate. Under review at *The Philosophy, Politics, and Economics Review*.

Responsibility to Reflect:

Doxastic Reflection as Epistemic Responsibility in Democracy

Maddox Larson
Creighton University

ABSTRACT: In this paper, I argue that responsible knowers are responsive to critical feedback that their reasons for believing in a given proposition or using certain principles of reasoning are inadequate. The project of democracy expects that agents can provide reasons for their beliefs during testimonial exchange. Voters provide reasons to representatives. Representatives provide reasons to voters. Voters provide reasons to each other. And representatives provide reasons to each other. This means that when voters or representatives cannot provide reasons, democratic mechanisms are obstructed. But not all beliefs are adopted autonomously through reflection, but rather by social-institutional context. I argue, then, that responsible agents reflect on the reasons for their belief when their reasons are inadequate. They are attuned to the nature of expertise and evaluate expert testimony with this in mind. In full, democracy requires that agents hold beliefs autonomously and be cognizant of the nature of expertise.

KEYWORDS: epistemology of democracy; democratic norms; epistemic responsibility

PAGE COUNT (exc. references): 17

WORD COUNT (excl. footnotes, references): 5,745

1. Introduction

Discursive exchange in a democratic society requires the provision of reasons. Indeed, political equality seems to presuppose that all citizens are (at least *potentially*) capable of contributing to deliberation and governance. The presupposition runs like this: if a rationally autonomous agent came to a decision that others do not accept, then he must surely be capable of explaining himself. In light of this, voters provide reasons to representatives. Representatives provide reasons to voters. Voters provide reasons to each other. And representatives provide reasons to each other. This means that when voters or representatives cannot provide reasons, democratic mechanisms are obstructed. And because of this, democratic mechanisms such as vote, talk, and dissent are built around the idea that agents can provide reasons.[1]

The focus of this essay is the plurality of situations in which one is unable to provide reasons for their beliefs. Following Catherine Elgin's Kantian account of epistemic normativity, I call these sorts of beliefs *heteronomous*. Because heteronomous beliefs are not adopted on the basis of reflection but are adopted because of the agent's situatedness in a given epistemic environment, agents do not necessarily have a reason for believing them. When one reflects to form a belief, they adopt the belief on the basis that they have reasoned through it and, ultimately, found it to be a reasonable position to take. When one has not reflected on a belief, one might still take the belief to be reasonable but not know why it is reasonable (i.e., lack second-order endorsement). Heteronomous beliefs are adopted unreflectively, and this prevents agents from giving reasons.

[1] These specific democratic mechanisms—vote, talk, and dissent—are distinctively *epistemic* as pointed out by Elizabeth Anderson (2006.)

In this paper, I argue that agents in democratic societies are epistemically responsible when they reflect on their beliefs and are responsive to criticism regarding their beliefs.[2] In this sense, the desired state for the responsible democratic agent is one in which their beliefs are held autonomously and not heteronomously. This means that the agent in question has reasons for believing. In order to argue that there are epistemic responsibilities specific to the context of democracy, Section 2 argues that the interdependent relation of epistemic agents to one another combined with democracy's assumption of potential epistemic contribution provides a basis for epistemic normativity. That is to say that the democratic system of governance puts forward epistemic expectations for its citizens that, when met, allow for deliberation. Section 3 argues that when agents hold beliefs they have not reflectively endorsed, democratic deliberation is frustrated. To elaborate on the trouble that heteronomous beliefs pose for democracy, I offer background religious beliefs as an example of beliefs that may be adopted without reflection and ultimately impact deliberation.

Following Elgin, I argue that one cannot fulfill the Epistemic Imperative—that one should only use beliefs or principles for deliberation that they could validate as a member of a larger community—when they possess heteronomous beliefs. This also means that heteronomous beliefs frustrate democratic deliberation. Section 4 draws on the Epistemic Imperative to present one specific responsibility: doxastic reflection. Specifically, Section 4 considers a paradigmatic case in which one agent has a heteronomous religious belief and another has a heteronomous scientific belief. I consider whether or not seeking out experts is enough to move these beliefs from heteronomous to autonomous. And I conclude that, within the context of democratic society, a belief may be said to be autonomous if the agent in question has ascertained whether

[2] My aim in this paper is primarily epistemological. I do not seek to make an explicitly or solely *moral* case for the sort of doxastic reflection that I describe. Rather, I want to suggest that insofar as one agent is an epistemic agent, then if he is in a democratic society he has—at least in an ideal sense—a responsibility to reflect on his beliefs.

their beliefs are actually acceptable from the perspectives of others. In democratic society, this typically occurs through testimonial exchange and discourse.

2. Democracy as a Source of Epistemic Normativity

Catherine Elgin (2017, 2021) argues that an agent is epistemically responsible when they use only beliefs or principles for reasoning which they could advocate and endorse in a community of epistemic equals (call this the Epistemic Imperative). This conception of epistemic normativity is derived from an interdependent understanding of epistemic communities—viz., groups of agents rely on one another's testimony and truth-telling. In this section, my aim is to first review Elgin's argument in favor of the Epistemic Imperative and follow this with an application to democratic societies. That is, I wish to show that one's ability to use reasons to justify their beliefs is constrained by the epistemic conduct of those around them.

a. Catherine Elgin's Account of Epistemic Normativity

Groups of agents rely on one another's testimony and it is precisely this *interdependence* of individual knowers in communities that fuels epistemic normativity. For, in one's own internal deliberation and in thought in general, they are constrained. Agents are constrained by those considerations (thoughts) which they take to be reasons that support their belief or even their use of a certain deliberative principle. These constraints—epistemic norms—result from one's epistemic community (Elgin 2021). Should one violate these norms, those in their community will detract epistemic trust or credibility from their testimony (Kauppinen 2018; Fricker 2007).

And these norms are necessary enforcement mechanisms. Individual agents are limited and fallible, so testimonial mechanisms such as instruction are epistemically risky. When one is

instructed by another, the truth of his beliefs becomes subject to the instructor. In a strong sense, the hearer is dependent on the speaker to tell the truth. Here, the risk is that the hearer might not be able to achieve the desired end state if the speaker conducts himself in an epistemically careless way. If the speaker reasons haphazardly and testifies to the hearer, then the hearer adopts a false belief. So, the enforcement of epistemic norms is necessary such that both the aims of the group and its individuals may be realized.

Crucial to Elgin's account of epistemic normativity is the idea that the reasons that deem a belief acceptable are public. An agent accepts a belief because the principles and standards they use to deliberate deem it fitting. But we must acknowledge that, during discourse, a statement is only said to support a conclusion if other competent individuals could not reasonably reject the implication. This means that agents are constrained by the available reasons they can take as supporting their belief. A given agent might have already concluded that her belief was reasonable, yet be met with opposition when she brings it forward to others who are competent on the matter. She rethinks the matter and presents it again to others to see if it holds muster. This is the sense in which Elgin says that we assess our beliefs in light of the standards that an epistemic community has designed to filter out confirmation bias (Elgin 2021, 109).

It is because the reasons which are accessible to justify one's belief are public that one should consult a principle analogous to Kant's Categorical Imperative—Elgin's Epistemic Imperative. To derive this principle, Elgin takes epistemic analogs of Kant's three formulations of the Categorical Imperative. In what follows, I will only present the epistemic analogs and their justification.[3]

The first principle leading to the Epistemic Imperative is that an epistemic agent should accept a consideration only if it would be universally acceptable (Elgin 2021, 65). In fact, Elgin's

[3] If the reader wishes to see the contours of this argument in greater detail, see Elgin 2021.

suggestion is that, as a pragmatic matter, any given agent cannot avoid doing this. When he accepts a consideration as appropriate for use in his own decision-making processes, he deems it to be a reasonable position to make—for he has reasoned to it. The trouble with only having this principle is that an agent might already find that the principles he uses are universally acceptable because he might assume that others think just as he does. For this reason, he might also expect that this consideration is one that other members of his community ought to use as well. To find our way around this trouble, Elgin (2021, 66) suggests a second principle: that the epistemic agent should ascertain whether, from the perspectives of his peers, a given belief appears acceptable. While one may find his own principles to be universally acceptable, he must take these to the group to see if his expectation is fulfilled or not. But surely an agent should not just accept a consideration because the majority agrees since this would not be evidence that it is correct but that it is popular? But "majority rules" is not the rule that we are aiming for—just because a principle of deliberation wins out among many does not make it the right one. For this reason, an epistemic agent should use only a consideration that they can endorse as a legislating member of a realm of ends (Elgin 2021, 66). The legislation analogy may lead one to think that whether or not one should use a given reason to support their belief is up to the vote of a given legislative body, but this is not the case. Both for Elgin and for Kant, the key point is that when one is part of a legislative body, they must support their assertions and claims with reasons in order that their peers might be convinced.

Having understood Elgin's account of epistemic normativity—insofar as one is bound by those around them—we may formulate the Epistemic Imperative as follows:

> **Epistemic Imperative (EI):** An agent should use only beliefs or principles for reasoning which they could advocate and endorse in a community of epistemic equals.

The Epistemic Imperative outlines what sort of epistemic conduct is responsible. Responsible knowers use considerations for deliberation that they could advocate for in a larger community. Those considerations that they use are those that they have considered from the perspectives of others and which they find to be reasonable and defensible. Should they fail to meet any criteria of EI, they will be held accountable by their peers.

Let us briefly consider an example. Suppose Theodore is an arbitrary epistemic agent. One day, Theodore comes to believe that dogs may grow to be over 20 feet tall—for he has recently read a book that featured Clifford the Big Red Dog. The next day, he approaches his friends and asserts that dogs can grow to be over 20 feet tall. His friends are quite surprised by his utterance and, in response, ask "How did you come to believe this?" Answering their questions Theodore explains that he read a book which featured a dog over 20 feet tall. In our terminology, Theodore's belief has the content "Dogs can grow to be over 20 feet tall" and his reason is that a trusted source says so. His friends then explain to him that when evaluating sources for credibility, he ought not take empirical information from sources of the type that he has. And, in the future, they might be less trusting of Theodore's assertions. I take this to be an unrealistic example, but it clearly demonstrates the sort of concepts previously described.

Let us take stock. In this section, I have reviewed Catherine Elgin's argument that epistemic normativity comes from the interdependent relation of individuals within a given epistemic community. Each individual is limited in his pursuit of his own epistemic ends and comes to rely on others either directly or through testimony. He might seek out an instructor or

consult a book that another has written—either way he is now dependent on their testimony or instruction in order to pursue his own epistemic end. In light of a community's interdependence, norms and other accountability mechanisms emerge as checks on behavior that prevents either individuals or the whole group from realizing their ends. Thus, we stated that an agent is said to be epistemically responsible when they use only beliefs or principles for reasoning which they could advocate and endorse in a community of epistemic equals.

b. Norms of the Democratic State

In this section, I argue that democracy constitutes a particular epistemic community. This is because, in ideal democracy, each citizen is able to participate in the process of deliberation because he is viewed as equal.[4] This political thesis that all constituents of a democracy are entitled to equal participation in the governance process entails an implicit epistemological assumption—namely, that those members are equally able to evaluate information and participate in group deliberation. For if these members were not assumed to be equally epistemically able, then there would be no point in allowing them to participate.[5] Citizens are epistemically able in the sense that, given the relevant information, they could deliberate and reach a decision. This is what Robert Dahl calls enlightened understanding: each citizen must have—within reasonable time limits—equal and effective opportunities to learn about the relevant alternative policies and their likely consequences (see Dahl 1998, 35-43). Enlightened understanding is a criterion of ideal democracy but is not worthwhile unless we assume that citizens are capable of consuming information, evaluating evidence, and reaching a decision.

---

[4] Here, I follow Robert Dahl (1998) in defining democracy as the system of popular governance characterized by political equality. This allows me to focus on the epistemic end of political equality.
[5] This point may move one to begin to wonder what certain prohibitions on voting mean for certain segments assumed epistemic autonomy (e.g., felons, non-residents, etc.).

Broadly construed, the epistemic mechanisms that allow democracy to function in accordance with the ideal of political equality are talk, vote, and dissent (Anderson 2006). Talk accounts for the discourse among citizens. They discuss news, elections, and policy in an effort to get a better idea of how they would like to participate in the political sphere. Vote and dissent constitute the mechanisms by which citizens communicate with elected officials.[6] These are carried out by formal processes such as elections or ballot measures. Vote and dissent convey information about voter preferences and beliefs to elected officials. Officials can use this information to make decisions that align with the interests of their constituents.

Following Alexis de Tocqueville ([1835] 2003), however, it is important to discuss not just democracy as a process of governance, but democracy as a "social state." Tocqueville notes that the formal processes of democracy are supported by informal processes. This is what makes talk such an important epistemic mechanism. But this is also what makes democratic society a community. Tocqueville observed that when elected officials failed to meet the responsibilities of their roles, then their constituents would hold them responsible. This might mean that the elected official is voted out of office, but Tocqueville had in mind the way that individuals are held personally responsible. Crucially, these responsibilities extend beyond the official-constituent relationship and they are not just political or legal, but also epistemic. When individual citizens falsify testimony, portray false information as true, or otherwise act epistemically irresponsibly, they are held accountable by their community members.

It is because democracy is an epistemic community with expectations of responsibility that it is a source of epistemic normativity. The normative force of these epistemic norms comes from social expectation resulting from interdependence. Citizens are dependent on one another in

[6] There is an open question of whether citizens might communicate with elected officials in other ways (i.e., cash transfers), but I am concerned with the *ideal* case of democracy. And so, *non-ideal* circumstances are outside of the scope of this paper.

order to achieve their epistemic ends and expect that others are sensitive to their epistemic vulnerability. All are vulnerable to adopting false beliefs or ignorance and this is what motivates epistemic responsibility within the epistemic community broadly. In a sense, what makes EI truly an imperative is that failure to comply—that is, failure to use only considerations which one can advocate and endorse in a larger community—often results in negative social-epistemic consequences such as losing credibility as a speaker. But one's credibility as a speaker or hearer is so crucial to one's status as a knower at all that this is enough to warrant the normative force of epistemic norms—at least from the agent's perspective.

3. Heteronomous Beliefs & the Epistemic Imperative

By the epistemic norms of democracy, responsible knowers confirm the viability of their beliefs and deliberative principles with those around them. This is because of the uncertainty and risk they face on their own. For they do not know why the price of eggs has increased or why their doctor prescribed amoxicillin instead of penicillin. Knowers are limited, fallible, take risks, and subject to luck and, oftentimes, they are required to act on the basis of uncertain information. But what keeps the epistemic system from collapsing under the weight of risk and luck is epistemic responsibility.[7] Responsible epistemic conduct prevents knowers from acting solely on the basis of risky (fallible) information.[8] Responsible knowers seek out additional perspectives to make informed decisions. This much I have made obvious. But the trouble for political processes that rely so heavily on knowers having reliable testimony or responsibly forming beliefs—as democracy does—is that not all beliefs are formed autonomously.

[7] This notion of the importance of responsible behavior in epistemic systems is drawn from Astrid Wagner's (2023) conception of equilibrium in an epistemic system as balance between trust, uncertainty, and responsibility.

[8] When knowers act irresponsibly, accountability mechanisms act to constrain their behavior (Kauppinen 2018). Further, the social nature of norms means that knowers face not just epistemic sanctions such as loss of credence or credibility, but also more distinctly social constraints such as ostracism or alienation (Bicchieri 2017).

Two key accounts of belief are doxastic voluntarism and doxastic involuntarism. The voluntarist argues that at least *some* beliefs are formed voluntarily (autonomously). William James ([1897] 2008) suggests that an individual may choose to believe so long as there is no evidence to the contrary. By contrast, the doxastic involuntarist contends that the mental state which describes belief cannot be reached by an agent choosing to believe a given proposition (e.g., Williams 1973; Bennett 1990; Qu 2017). Belief is not voluntary because one cannot induce the required mental state in another without giving evidence or support (Bennett 1990).

In arguing for a voluntarist position, Catherine Elgin (2017) demonstrates that just as voluntary actions are subject to constraints, so too are voluntary beliefs. An agent's epistemic conduct is subject to her will since she can choose when to stop gathering evidence, investigating other perspectives, or checking inferences (Elgin 2017, 97). She is constrained, however, by the reasons that she can take as justifying her epistemic conduct. Recall that we have previously explored the ways in which agents are held accountable for the reasons they take by their epistemic communities. Thus, to Elgin, when an agent is not compliant with EI and does not adopt a belief autonomously, they adopt it heteronomously (involuntarily). In what follows, I present two cases of religious belief that differ in terms of epistemic autonomy. The key point is not to take religious beliefs as adversarial to democracy, but to point to a common case in which social-institutional context contributes to the adoption of heteronomous beliefs.[9]

Case 1: Suppose there is an agent *A* who is raised in a religious environment. They are raised to adhere to the religious ethical code taught by their parents. They attend regular gatherings and engage in the corresponding practices. They adhere to these rules and expectations on account of being expected to and, frankly, not knowing any different. They

[9] What I have in mind when I reference "institutions" are, per North (1991), the humanly-devised constraints that structure interactions. As will be seen later, understanding what institutions are will allow us to better understand the social-epistemic implications of institutions as retaining, enforcing, or instilling beliefs.

behave in a way that is congruent with the belief *q*, which is a foundational tenet of the religion.[10] The belief *q* is adopted into their inferential map and they use *q* as a basis for inference—deriving ethical theses from it without hesitation.[11] If, however, *A* were asked how they know *q* or what made *q* a viable basis for inference, they would not be able to provide any reflectively considered answer. Thus, *A* acts and reasons on *q* and seems strongly committed to *q*, yet cannot provide reasons to support their use of *q*.

Case 2: Suppose there is an agent *B* who is not raised in a religious environment. They are not raised to adhere to a specific religious ethical code, but rather a common-sense morality that their parents adopt from their community. They do not attend any religious gatherings or engage in any corresponding practices. Later in life, however, *B* encounters *A*'s religion. They spend time with the religious code, reflecting on each tenet of the religion's belief system as it arises. Their inferential map had not accounted for *q*, so they spend time working to understand how their inferential map might be impacted from adopting *q* as a basis for inference. They confront any confusion that arises by discussing matters with religious officials. Over time, they come to behave in a way that is congruent with the belief *q* and use *q* as a basis for inference. If *B* were asked how they know *q* or if *B* were asked what makes *q* a viable basis for inference, they would be able to present a clear and reflectively considered answer.

In what sense, if any, can we say that the Cases 1 and 2 differ? According to Elgin's distinction between heteronomy and autonomy we may say that Case 1 is a case of heteronomous belief since *A* lacks the second-order endorsement of *q*. In other words, *A* is not

[10] Some argue that as long as observed behavior would reasonably lead one to conclude that an agent believes p, then we can conclude they believe *p* (see Schwitzgebel 2024). In specifying that *A*'s behavior is congruent with the belief *q*, I am to show that the matter is more complicated. Whether or not the agent can support their belief through second-order endorsement is the subject of autonomy, which is our focus here.

[11] What I have in mind when I refer to inferential maps is akin to Quine's web of beliefs (Quine 1951; Quine and Ullian 1970). Agents will determine whether or not a belief is acceptable and reasonable based in part on how well it adheres with their previously adopted beliefs. These previously adopted beliefs form a sort of web or schema where any given two beliefs are connected by a coherence relation.

able to provide reasons for supporting *q* as a basis for inference and this is the mark of a heteronomous belief. This is because *A*'s belief is dependent on their epistemic environment. If *A* had been raised in a different family or if their parents had different commitments, etc., then *A* would not have come to act in a way conducive with *q*. But *A* lacks the second-order endorsement that proves crucial to epistemic agency. This means that *A* cannot provide reasons justifying their belief if they were prompted in a larger group. This is the definition of EI. Thus, *A*'s inability to give reasons prevents them from participating in the deliberation of the larger epistemic community (so long as the belief in question is relevant). In other words, they fail to satisfy EI.

4. Epistemically Responsible Conduct in Democratic Society

Testimonial exchange in democratic society expects compliance with the Epistemic Imperative (EI). That is to say that in everyday discourse, we expect our interlocutors to have reasons for believing what they do and even to have reasons justifying their use of certain deliberative principles.[12] We expect as much, in part, because decisions regarding governance can only be reached via democracy's epistemic mechanisms when agents use principles and beliefs which they can provide reasons for. But I have demonstrated that some beliefs are not held as a matter of reflective endorsement. So, the relevant question is how responsible knowers behave with respect to their heteronomous beliefs. In the remainder of the paper, I argue that responsible knowers are responsive to critical feedback that their reasons are inadequate. Further, this specific responsibility follows from EI.

[12] This is not exclusive to democracy, however, I find that the framework of democracy provides a realistic and more explicit framework for *why* we would expect our interlocutors to have reasons. Perhaps an argument could be made that the social expectation of having-reasons is not exclusive to democratic testimonial exchange, but rather is more generally true. This is outside the scope of the current paper.

Consider again agents *A* and *B* from the previous section. Both agents harbor a religious belief *q*. The first agent *A* is not able to provide reflectively considered reasons justifying their use of *q* while *B* is. I have previously established that this means that *A* believes *q* *heteronomously* while *B* believes *q autonomously*. Further, I demonstrated that when *A* is questioned by another agent *C* regarding theses derived from *q*, *A*'s inability to provide reasons prevents them from fulfilling EI. In holding the belief *q* heteronomously, *A* does not consider whether it would be acceptable from the perspective of others (EI_2). Further, they cannot adequately participate in group deliberation because they have no reasons for believing *q*. Suppose further that during their discussion with *A*, *C* identifies *A*'s belief *q* as heteronomous because *A*'s reasons are inadequate. (We suppose that *C* is not acting out of malice, but genuinely. And *A* receives this as it was intended.)

We might be tempted, in this scenario, to ask how *A* should revise their belief. Afterall, *C* has pointed out that *A*'s reasons for believing *q* are inadequate. But before *A* can revise their belief, they must identify whether it really is held heteronomously or not. That is, *A* must reflect on their beliefs in order to identify the reasons that they take as supporting *q*. Since these reasons were inadequate to *C*, *A* must consider *C*'s objections and determine if there is cause to retain these reasons as supporting *q*. But *A* is not necessarily an expert in the set of religious beliefs *Q* (which includes *q*) that he holds, so he might seek out religious officials who have considered these matters more closely. The religious official might illuminate the relations within *Q* and how *q* is supported.[13] This is well and good, but the value of taking an outsider's opinion to heed is that they are not bound by the same biases.

[13] There is an interesting question of whether or not *A* now holds their beliefs autonomously because an official has explained the relations within *Q* to them. You might think that they do not necessarily possess a belief *q* autonomously because they can elaborate on the relations on *Q*. This would be argued because if *A* were quizzed on why *q* is a viable belief, they would regurgitate answers from the official. They would not *grasp* the relations.

It seems that we have reached an impasse. For *A* has received critical feedback from *C* that their reasons for believing *q* and using it for inference are insufficient. *A* then went to an expert on the matter (a religious official) and sought counsel. The religious official then explains to *A* the reasons that the official takes as supporting use of *q*. Further, *q* is supported by the relations within *Q*, the full set of beliefs characterizing this religion. But now, when *A* returns to *C*, it seems that they will simply regurgitate the reasons that the official had given them. It is not clear that, in seeking out expert opinion, *A* has fully adopted those reasons as their own.

Let us consider a separate scenario in which two agents, *D* and *E*, are discussing a specific policy matter when it becomes apparent that they disagree on the veracity of a scientific claim *s*. In short, *D* finds *E*'s reasons for believing *s* to be inadequate. *E*'s reasons for believing *s* include evidence featured in scientific studies that they are familiar with as well as some experiments that *E* has conducted on their own. Thus, to *E*, *s* seems to be quite veracious and using *s* as a basis for inference does not seem troubling at all. But *E*, being responsible, seeks out additional information by contacting an expert, a scientist specializing in an *s*-related field. This scientist validates *E*'s reasons for believing *s*. The scientist explains the relations that *s* has to other scientific beliefs in set *S*.

What can be said of these two cases? In the first, *A* sought out an official on the belief *q* to identify whether or not their reasons for believing it were legitimate. And in the second case *E* did the same but with respect to a scientific claim *s*. Despite their structural similarity, these cases differ in at least two crucial ways. Recall William James's argument that *absent evidence either way* belief in God can be willed (James [1897] 2008). The difference between these two cases hinges on evidence and the nature of expertise. The domain of science is empirical, observable phenomena and this means that the nature of the evidence they are concerned with is distinctly *a posteriori*. Meanwhile, in religious studies evidence is typically of the *a priori* kind

since empirical reality does not seem to lean either way.[14] This means that experts in science and experts in religion differ starkly. The scientist is well-versed in empirical methods and making inferences from observations. The religious official or religious scholar, by contrast, is typically accustomed to inferring from *a priori* axioms. He starts with the proposition 'God exists' and aims to deduce theses about the nature of experience and nature of the world. The two experts employ different methods because they have different aims.

Without diving deeper into the difference between religious knowledge and scientific knowledge, we have made all the advances we can. All epistemic agents form beliefs on the basis of experience and inference. Responsible agents ascertain whether their beliefs are *actually* acceptable from the perspectives of others (EI_2) and, in democratic society, this typically occurs through testimonial exchange and discourse. When an agent's reasons for believing *p* or using deliberative principles are inadequate, the responsible agent reflects on the nature of the belief in question. If this belief was formed autonomously (as a matter of reflective endorsement), then the agent has nothing to fear for he is aware of the reasons he possesses and has a second-order endorsement of the belief in question. On the other hand, if the belief was formed heteronomously, then he has no reflectively-considered reasons for believing it. Regardless of the state of autonomy of the belief, the agent reflects on his reasons for believing. If the belief is autonomous then he likely sides with his own reasons and continues to discuss the matter. If the belief is heteronomous, then he may seek out expert testimony in order to help revise his belief. But, as we have seen, the responsible agent must be cognizant of the nature of the belief and of the experts in question. All beliefs are responsive to the truth and the world, but the state of the

[14] There are some who would argue against this claim because they find that science validates the existence of a god or deity. Werner Heisenberg is attributed with saying that the first gulp of natural science will lead you to atheism, but God is waiting for you at the bottom of the glass. But we cannot ignore that the majority of philosophy of religion has been interested in arguing *a priori* that a god exists. Consider Aquinas's five proofs, Plantinga's modal argument, or Descartes's and Anselm's ontological argument.

world or the truth are not always evident. Cognizance of the nature of expertise allows the agent to form beliefs and revise his reasons while maintaining autonomy.[15]

5. Conclusion

An agent raised in a democratic society will form beliefs about the nature of democracy and some specific beliefs they will have no control over per se. For instance, a belief that "democratic freedom entails freedom of speech" might be formed by way of who one is around during formative years (social context) or the education and activities that one partakes in (institutional context). The key point is that agents might form beliefs as a matter of reflective endorsement (autonomous belief) or as a matter of social-institutional context (heteronomous belief).

But democracy requires us to be aware of our beliefs and how they influence our contributions to the broader project of popular governance. This means that the project of democracy expects that agents can provide reasons for believing a given belief during testimonial exchange. When agents cannot provide reasons for believing that others find acceptable, reasonable, or otherwise adequate, they are unable to engage in the collective process of rational, autonomous deliberation. Because the ideal of political equality—democracy's defining characteristic—presupposes that all citizens are at least potentially capable of contributing to deliberation.

I demonstrated that the responsible epistemic agent reflects on the reasons for their beliefs when it is brought to their attention that their reasons might be inadequate. This responsiveness to critical feedback not only follows from the Epistemic Imperative, but further

[15] It is worth noting that I have said nothing of the so-called superiority of one's religious or scientific claim. My key concern in this essay is whether one holds beliefs—regardless of content—autonomously or heteronomously. One may hold religious or scientific beliefs in either manner. I have chosen this example because they are paradigmatic examples of beliefs that may be held heteronomously in contemporary American democracy.

supports autonomous testimonial exchange in democracy. When agents reflect on their beliefs, they consult experts and must, I argue, be cognizant of the differences between experts. Religious experts and scientific experts employ different methods to arrive at different results and this is because of their different aims. Yet still one might have a religious belief which they find relevant to discourse. But if their reasons are inadequate then they must reflect and contact experts—being attuned to the nature of expertise.

Acknowledgements

A revised version of this essay was submitted for credit to Professor Jacob M. Rump in PHL 495: Directed Independent Study (Spring 2024) at Creighton University. The author is grateful to Professor Rump and an anonymous reviewer for providing valuable feedback.

6. References

Anderson, E. (2006). The Epistemology of Democracy. *Episteme*, 3(1-2), 8-22. DOI 10.1353/epi.0.0000.

Bennett, J. (1990). Why is Belief Involuntary? *Analysis*, 50(2), 87-107.

Bicchieri, C. (2017). *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure, and Change Social Norms*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Dahl, R. (1998). *On Democracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Elgin, C. (2017). Epistemic Normativity. In *True Enough*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute for Technology Press, 91-121.

______. (2021). The Realm of Epistemic Ends. In Jonathan Matheson and Kirk Lougheed (eds.), *Epistemic Autonomy*. New York: Routledge, 55-70.

Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic Injustice: Power & the Ethics of Knowing*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hieronymi, P. (2006). Controlling Attitudes. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 87 (1), 45-74.

James, W. ([1897] 2008). The Will to Believe. In *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. Project Gutenberg. https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/26659/pg26659-images.html.

Kauppinen, A. (2018). Epistemic Norms and Epistemic Accountability. *Philosophers' Imprint*, 18(8), 1-16. www.philosophersimprint.org/018008/.

Qu, H. (2017). Hume's Doxastic Involuntarism. *Mind*, 126(501), 53-92.

Quine, W.V. (1951). Main Trends in Philosophy: Two Dogmas of Empiricism. *The Philosophical Review*, 60(1), 20-43.

Quine, W. V., and Ullian, J.S. (1970). *The Web of Belief*. Edited by J. S. Ullian. New York: Random House.

Schwitzgebel, E. (2024). "Belief." In Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (eds.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2024/entries/belief/.

Tocqueville, A. ([1835] 2003). *Democracy in America and Two Essays on America.* Translated by Gerald Bevan. London: Penguin Books.

Wagner, Astrid. 2023. Cognitive Vulnerability and the Post-Truth Challenge. In Óscar L. González-Castán (ed.), *Cognitive Vulnerability: An Epistemological Approach*. De Grutyer, 159-176.

Williams, B. (1973). Deciding to Believe. In *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers, 1956-1972*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 136-151.