Arrogance, Polarisation and Arguing to Win

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**Abstract:** A number of philosophers have defended the view that seemingly intellectually arrogant behaviours are epistemically beneficial. In this chapter I take issue with most of their conclusions. I argue, for example, that we should not expect steadfastness in one's belief in the face of contrary evidence nor overconfidence in one’s own abilities to promote better evaluation of the available evidence resulting in good-quality group-judgement. These features of individual thinkers are, on the contrary, likely to lead groups to end up in stalemates and to polarise over issues. It is true that groups benefit from including members that, prior to discussion, hold diverse views. But disagreement benefits group judgement only when it is transient, rather than entrenched. That is, groups reach better quality conclusions when a number of diverse opinions are disseminated and evaluated fairly before reaching a consensus. If this is right, it would seem that individual qualities, such as open-mindedness and even-handedness about the epistemic value of opinions other than one's own, rather than steadfastness or overconfidence are conducive to better quality group judgement

A number of philosophers (e.g., Alfano & Sullivan, forthcoming; Hallsson & Kappel, 2018; Levy, 2019, 2020; Levy & Alfano, 2019) have defended the view that seemingly intellectually arrogant behaviours, such as overconfidence in one's individual abilities compared to those of groups, and a tendency to remain steadfast in one's beliefs despite being presented with counter-evidence that should seemingly weaken one's level of confidence, are epistemically beneficial. These features might trip up the lone thinker. However, human beings frequently engage in collective deliberation and decision-making. It is in this context that these apparent individual epistemic defects come into their own and would give rise to collective epistemic virtue. Hence, these philosophers have concluded that individuals have good epistemic reasons to embrace their biases of steadfast overconfidence in their views and abilities (Hallsson, 2019; Levy, 2019, 2020). Having members who behave in seemingly arrogant ways would thus not be a problem for epistemic communities (Levy, 2020).

In this chapter I take issue with most of these conclusions. I argue that we should not expect steadfastness in one's belief in the face of contrary evidence nor overconfidence in individual abilities compared to the likelihood of group success to promote better evaluation of the available evidence resulting in good quality group judgement. These features of individual thinkers are, on the contrary, likely to lead groups to end up in stalemates and to polarise over issues. It is true that groups benefit from including members that, prior to discussion, hold diverse views (Schulz-Hardt et al., 2006; Schulz-Hardt et al., 2000). But disagreement benefits group judgement only when it is transient, rather than entrenched (Zollman, 2010). That is, groups reach better quality conclusions when a number of diverse opinions are disseminated and evaluated fairly before reaching a consensus.

If this is right, it would seem that individual qualities, such as open-mindedness and even-handedness about the epistemic value of opinions other than one's own, rather than steadfastness or overconfidence are conducive to better quality group judgement. Furthermore, steadfastness is, in actuality, most likely the outcome of competitive and defensive motivations that promote being invested in one's own arguments, strengthen one's imperviousness to counter-evidence, fuel overconfidence, and facilitate belief extremity. Contrary to what one might believe from reading these philosophers’ work, it is individual intellectual virtues that when amplified at group level result in high-quality group reasoning and decision-making.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The overall lesson that I wish to convey is that these philosophers have been too quickly impressed by the pleasing counter-intuitiveness of some facets of the literature on group reasoning. Instead, I wish to urge caution and to suggest that, when the full complexities of the mechanisms at work in group deliberation and of their interactions with personal and situational variables are taken into account, a more nuanced picture emerges. This is a picture that increasingly supports the conclusion that competitive arguing to win, accompanied by steadfastness and overconfidence in one’s individual abilities, does not make for good collective deliberation.

The chapter consists of three parts. In section 1, I outline the arguments put forward by Mercier and Sperber (2017) that are the inspiration for the philosophical positions I criticise. These arguments seek to establish that the function of human reasoning is to persuade others by giving them reasons to hold a given opinion and to change their mind if they currently hold a different view. This evolutionary explanation would demonstrate that human cognitive biases, which are responsible for defective individual reasoning, are not bugs but adaptive features of mechanisms that have evolved to contribute to collective judgement and decision-making. In section 2, I present two arguments directly or indirectly inspired by the approach taken by Mercier and Sperber (2017). The first argument, offered by Hallsson and Kappel (2018), defends the rationality of a policy of absolute steadfastness in the face of disagreement on the grounds that the presence of minority dissent promotes better quality group argumentation. The second, developed by Levy (2019), concludes that overconfidence in one's own abilities compared with one’s estimate of the likelihood of group success promotes diversity of opinions by facilitating minority dissent. Section 3 shows that, contrary to the arguments offered in section 2, we should not expect either steadfastness or overconfidence to facilitate better quality information evaluation. Instead, we should expect both features to be detrimental to group deliberation. I base this conclusion primarily on empirical research that highlights the role of motivations in determining the quality of group judgements and decision-making.

**1. Reasoning as a collective enterprise: individual biases as features rather than bugs**

Mercier and Sperber (2017) offer, within the context of their interactionist account of reason, the clearest defence of the view that some biases affecting individual reasoning are beneficial to group deliberation. In their opinion the individual human mind is poorly suited for solitary reasoning. It exhibits such distinctive biases that one would think of it as being maladaptive if the function of reason were to construct arguments whose premises entail their conclusions. It would thus be an enigma why such a bugged cluster of psychological mechanisms has evolved. Mercier and Sperber argue that the mystery is dissolved if we think that the function of human reason is to provide reasons to interlocutors with the aim of persuading them. Once reasoning is conceived as a collective enterprise (or at least an enterprise involving debating dyads), it becomes apparent that the so-called bugs of human individual reasoning are adaptive features because they promote efficient and truth-conducive divisions of cognitive labour. It is this picture that has directly or indirectly influenced those philosophers that defend the view that individual thinkers have epistemic reasons to adopt seemingly arrogant attitudes of overconfidence and steadfastness in the face of counter-evidence. In this section, I consider two of these biases -“myside” bias and “overconfidence” – before raising some reservations about the picture of collective deliberation that emerges from Mercier and Sperber (2017) and highlighting some of the implicit assumptions presupposed in their discussion.

There is overwhelming evidence that when individuals seek information about a given topic or question, their information searches are biased. This bias is often described as a confirmation bias. Individuals would predominantly seek information that confirms their pre-existing views, rather than search for information that could falsify them (Nickerson, 1998). The Wason Selection Test is presented as an illustration of this tendency (Wason, 1968). The test consists in showing four cards to subjects. Each card has a number on one side and a letter on the other. Participants see two cards with the letter side up (‘E’ and ‘K’) and two cards with the number side up (‘2’ and ‘7’). They are asked to determine which cards they need to turn to ascertain whether if there is an ‘E’ on one side of the card, then there is a ‘2’ on the other. Participants are quick in identifying the card showing the letter ‘E’ as one, but often presume that the card bearing a ‘2’ must also be turned. That is a mistake. The two cards that must be turned are the one showing the number ‘7’, since it would demonstrate the rule to be false if it bore an ‘E’ on the other side, and the card with the letter ‘E’ to ascertain whether there is a ‘2’ on the other side.

This pattern of answers has often been taken to show that individuals seek to verify rather than falsify hypotheses. Mercier and Sperber (2017) think that this characterisation misrepresents the nature of the bias. Individuals are not simply biased towards confirming whichever possibility their entertain. Rather they favour finding information that supports their pre-existing views but also information that speaks against the contrary position. For this reason, they think that “myside” rather than confirmation is a more fitting label for this bias.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Mercier and Sperber (2017) claim that this bias is an example of motivated reasoning. According to this view, inferential processes are always directed by motivations to pursue goals. Sometimes the goal is to arrive at an accurate understanding, but often other goals such as self-enhancement, or impression management are operative. In these instances the individual explores inferential avenues that promote achieving these goals that are unrelated to accuracy concerns (Kunda, 1990; Scott-Kakures, 2000). The facility with which thinkers can formulate considerations supporting their pre-existing opinion and find reasons to reject contrary viewpoints points to the operation of a directional question serving the goals of enhancing and defending the self, given what we can presume is an investment in one’s own opinions.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The second bias, also discussed by Mercier et al. (2015), that has impressed philosophical defenders of the overall rationality of some individual cognitive biases on the grounds that they promote efficient and truth-conducive collaborative reasoning, is a bias of overconfidence in the ability of individuals working alone to find solutions to problems. This is a significant overestimate of individuals’ abilities that is accompanied by a small underestimate of the probability of group success. Using the Wason Selection Test as the puzzle to solve, Mercier and colleagues found that laypeople grossly overestimated the percentage of lone individuals who offer the correct answer while slightly underestimating the percentage of groups that do so. The difference in performance is staggering. Fewer than 15% of subjects find the correct answer when working alone, whilst approximately 65-70% succeed when allowed to discuss the puzzle as a small group. The estimates by laypeople were wide off the mark since they thought that around 50% of individuals and 55-70% of groups succeed.

One might derive different lessons from these results. For example, one might note that evolution is a satisficing rather than an optimising mechanism. In addition, one would expect human cognitive mechanisms to be biased in favour of self-defence. It is much less costly for an animal to mistake something innocuous for a threat than the other way round. We should thus expect human cognition to comprise many mechanisms that produce a preponderance of false positives. If this is the case, one might continue, “myside” bias might be of a piece with these tendencies since it serves the role of protecting the self from reputational challenges. Similar considerations could perhaps be offered to justify the emergence of the propensity to overestimate the relative performance of individuals compared to groups.

Mercier and Sperber (2017) defend a radically different explanation. They agree that these cognitive biases are not bugs but features of human cognition. However, instead of arguing that biases are what we should expect from mechanisms whose goals include self-defence as well as accuracy-related goals, they postulate that human individual reasoning would have evolved for the purpose of persuading other people. This function would make reasoning especially suited to group deliberation and decision-making. Hence, individual biases would facilitate unbiased and reliable collective reasoning.

In section 3, I shall offer considerations that speak against the claim that the “myside” and “overconfidence” bias facilitate reliable collective deliberation. For now, however, I present some arguments that can be offered in support of this view. Provided that group members, prior to deliberation, hold a diversity of views, the “myside” bias facilitates a division of epistemic labour during information searches. For example, suppose that a group needs to decide whether p is true, for any given proposition p. Because of the “myside” bias those group members who believe p explore that portion of the informational space that includes reasons for believing that p as well as objections to not-p. On the other side, group members who prior to deliberation believe that not-p, focus their efforts on thinking of reasons for not-p and of objections to p. This division of cognitive labour is efficient. It avoids reduplication of labour and it makes individual informational searches more tractable by restricting them to a portion of the informational space. Of course these efficiency gains only obtain when individuals are brought together whose views prior to discussion are at variance with each other.

The “overconfidence” bias should bring epistemic benefits of a different kind. More specifically, it should inhibit some well-known possible deficits in information dissemination. These include tendencies to self-silence and to agree prematurely with an emerging consensus that give rise to informational losses and informational cascades (Sunstein, 2006, ch. 4). Informational losses occur when group members do not share information of which other groups members are unaware. These are a serious risk for groups where hidden profiles are present. These are groups where some members have useful information which they do not know is unknown to other group members.

Informational cascades occur when individuals agree with an emerging consensus, perhaps through self-silencing, because they presume that other people must have good reasons for their opinions. Of course, other group members may be ignorant of the information the self-silencing individual could bring to bear on the debate. It is even possible that they would change their minds if they learnt about it. These deficits in group reasoning are reduced when an individual is prone to overestimate how often individuals are right and groups wrong. Based on this false estimate a group member might voice her dissenting opinion rather than silence it. This is beneficial to the group since it fosters creativity and the consideration of different viewpoints (De Dreu et al., 2008).

If these considerations are along the right lines, irrespective as to whether human reasoning has these features because it has evolved for the purpose of group reasoning, there are individual biases that contribute to the efficiency and reliability of group processes of information search and dissemination. We might however wonder how groups made up of biased thinkers are able to evaluate the information that they have collected and disseminated in a manner that helps them reach consensus on a judgement of good epistemic quality. That is to say, we might ask how they can converge on a conclusion that, ideally, is true but at least very well supported by the evidence.

Mercier and Sperber (2017) argue that groups achieve this end because individual processes of information evaluation are, unlike those involved in searches and dissemination, largely unbiased. To this extent they offer the evidence supplied by some studies conducted by Hahn and Hornikx (2016) and by Hahn and Oaksford (2007) showing that individuals are sensitive to the quality of arguments so that they tend to be persuaded by good quality reasons whilst remaining unmoved by poor quality considerations. In sum, what would make human collective deliberation an overall efficient and reliable process is its enviable combination of biased searches, which reduce reduplication; biased dissemination, which minimises information loss; and unbiased evaluation.

Before offering in the next section critical analyses of the defences of belief steadfastness offered by Hallsson and Kappel (2018) and of overconfidence presented by Levy (2019), I want to conclude this section by highlighting some aspects and presuppositions of their views that are underplayed by Mercier and Sperber (2017) but which must be taken into account when assessing their position. These features of their account raise questions about the applicability of the evidence adduced by Mercier and Sperber to group deliberation as it is carried out in ordinary circumstances. Further, they also cast doubt about their interpretation of this evidence.

First, Mercier and Sperber, and in this they are not alone, focus their discussion of group deliberation on examples such as those involving the Wason Selection Test that have specific features that make them highly unusual so that they would be rarely encountered in ordinary circumstances.[[4]](#endnote-4) These cases involve solving a puzzle that concerns a purely factual matter that has a single and wholly correct answer so that there is only one side to the issue. In addition, the answer is also self-evidently correct so that once it is found and explained, there is no possible doubt about its correctness. This is highly unusual since most debates even about factual matters are more complex with answers that rarely dispel all doubts.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Second, Mercier and Sperber presuppose, like others working on the topic, that groups are motivated to reach consensus on the correct answer.[[6]](#endnote-6) But in real life groups often include individuals who primarily care to be the one who finds the answer. Mercier and Sperber also presuppose that groups are able to deliberate systematically because they care sufficiently about the problem and are not under pressure to come up quickly with an answer. These presuppositions, however, are also unrealistic when applied to ordinary circumstances. For these two sets of reasons, it is at best a moot point whether conclusions from these examples can be extrapolated to group deliberation in ordinary circumstances.

Third, there are concerns about the evidence adduced by Mercier and Sperber (2017) for the claim that information evaluation is unbiased. They base their discussion on the evidence supplied by the experiments reported by Hahn and colleagues (Hahn & Hornikx, 2016; Hahn & Oaksford, 2007). But these claims are not uncontroversial. In contrast, other studies have found that individuals’ evaluation of evidence is also biased (For a review, see Maio & Haddock, 2015, pp. 114-122). People process more deeply and systematically information that is contrary to their views rather than evidence that supports it. However, this systematic processing is often distorted by the desire to show that this information is false or weak. At the same time, they tend to accept unquestioningly considerations in support of their opinions. In general, current literature on group reasoning highlights a number of circumstances in which groups outperform individuals by being more creative, by solving problems and by making good quality judgements. But in many circumstances groups instead perform awfully, making decisions that turn out to be catastrophically bad for everyone (For a review, see De Dreu et al., 2008).

Fourth, this diversity of results strongly indicates that situational and/or personality factors are the most significant determinants of outcomes. It is thus highly improbable that the behaviour of groups is primarily the result of cognitive biases that are shared features of every human reasoner. As a matter of fact there is fairly substantial evidence that a range of individual and situational factors are predictive of groups’ reasoning behaviour. These include personality variables such as the dispositional needs for closure or for cognition exhibited by individual group members (Cacioppo et al., 1996; Kruglanski, 2004; Kruglanski et al., 1993). Motivational factors such as the desire to win, to self-enhance, to reach harmony, consensus or to figure out the truth are equally significant (De Dreu et al., 2008, p. 32). Finally, situational factors are important. The quality of group reasoning depends on variables such as urgency, group composition and structure, and the kinds of pressures under which the group is working (De Dreu et al., 2008, pp. 40-41). When all of these reservations and clarifications are taken into account, the models of group deliberation appear significantly more complex than envisaged by Mercier and Sperber, thus raising questions about the alleged role of universally shared cognitive biases in facilitating epistemically excellent group performance.

Finally, when discussing the nature of “myside” bias one might be tempted to think of it as a bias in the sense of being a disposition or mechanism that is unreliable and thus frequently leads to inaccurate outputs. Some aspects of Mercier and Sperber’s discussion encourage this interpretation. However, it would be a mistake to think of the “myside” bias in these terms.[[7]](#endnote-7) It is insufficiently appreciated that there are at least two distinct notions of cognitive bias. Bias in the first sense is by definition an epistemic defect. In this sense a cognitive bias is an unreliable disposition or mechanism. But there is also another notion of bias according to which biases can offer epistemic advantages to the individuals who possess them. A bias in this second sense is a tendency or mechanism that reduces in a non-evidential way the hypothesis space (Antony, 2016, p. 161). Biases of this sort can be epistemically beneficial because they contribute to render tractable otherwise intractable cognitive tasks. They also need not be unreliable.

The so-called “myside” is clearly a bias in this second sense since it biases in a non-evidential manner information searches by reducing the space searched. It is not, however, necessarily a bias in the first sense of the term. Rather, arguably, “myside” contributes only indirectly to errors in evaluation that result in bad believing. The problem would not lie with this bias but with motivational factors that lead agents to terminate their inquiries too soon.[[8]](#endnote-8) That is, errors emerge only when subjects adopt motivationally biased evaluations of the partial (in the sense of incomplete rather than incorrect) information searched judging it to be sufficient to fix belief even when it is not. If this is right, it is not obviously true that the “myside” bias is an epistemic defect of individuals. Rather it might be beneficial at least in the limited sense of rendering intractable issues tractable. Be that as it may, evidence of the existence of this bias is not evidence that individuals’ epistemic defects are beneficial to group’s performance.

**2. Steadfastness and overconfidence: vice or virtue**

In this section I detail two philosophical arguments in favour of the rationality of a policy of remaining steadfast in one’s belief in the light of counter-evidence and of being overconfident in one’s own abilities, and thus seeking and defending alternative viewpoints despite the existence of a broad group consensus on some topic. These arguments have been offered in the context of articles whose main conclusions go beyond these arguments but which depend on them for their correctness. Thus, Hallsson and Kappel (2018) are primarily interested in the conditional claim that individual steadfastness is rational if and when it contributes to improving groups’ performance. They would be happy to agree that steadfastness is not always so productive. They would also concur that a policy of steadfastness is not rational when it hinders rather than facilitates high-quality deliberation. On a similar note Levy (2019) is largely a defence of the rationality of science deniers, but his argument in favour of individualism is an important plank in the overall structure. Further, Levy (2020) himself has made these considerations explicit when he endorses the adoption in some circumstances of seemingly arrogant attitudes for their contribution to improved group deliberation.

In their paper on the deliberative division of epistemic labour and the benefits of disagreement Hallsson and Kappel (2018) argue steadfastness in the face of disagreement can be a rational policy in-so-far-as it promotes distinctive epistemic benefits.[[9]](#endnote-9) Their argument is predicated on the idea that it is rational to adopt a policy that promotes a deliberative division of epistemic labour since such division promotes better quality group judgement. Hence, it is rational to adopt a policy of absolute steadfastness because such a policy promotes diversity of opinion within groups, which in turn fosters, thanks to the “myside” bias, a deliberative division of epistemic labour leading to better quality group judgements. If this is correct, when faced with a disagreement it might be rational for both parties to remain completely steadfast in their beliefs, irrespective of the truth of their opinions, and even though these individuals would not be updating their beliefs in light of the available evidence.

Hallsson and Kappel (2018) do not state that this policy is beneficial in every instance. Presumably, however, they believe that steadfastness promotes good collective reasoning often enough to be the sort of thing that people could rationally adopt as a matter of policy. In-so-far-as they recommend a policy of absolute steadfastness in the face of disagreement, Hallsson and Kappel (2018) recommend the adoption of the seemingly arrogant attitude of taking oneself to be rational in persisting in one’s opinion without taking others’ views to the contrary into account even when those views happen to be correct.

Levy’s (2019) argument for the epistemic value of a bias that he describes as epistemic individualism relies broadly speaking on empirical evidence akin to the experiments mentioned by Hallsson and Kappel in their paper. Levy notes that an overconfidence in the abilities of individuals relative to group performance is beneficial because it promotes the formation of minority dissenting factions within groups. In addition, he mentions empirical evidence showing that groups that, prior to deliberation, include diverse views are less prone to biased information searches (Schulz-Hardt et al., 2000) and more likely to discover the solution to a problem in cases of hidden profiles (Schulz-Hardt et al., 2006). These results would show that overconfidence in individuals’ abilities, and especially one’s own, promotes better information search and dissemination by facilitating a division of cognitive labour and preventing information losses because it inhibits the tendency not to share information that is not commonly held.

The conclusion that Levy draws from these considerations is akin to that derived by Hallsson and Kappel. Namely, it is rational to believe in ways that do not accord with the evidence, and adopt seemingly arrogant attitudes, since in the long run these promote epistemic excellence in group deliberation. Based on these considerations Levy (2020) concludes that individuals’ disposition to overweigh one’s own opinion and underweigh those held by others might be an adaptation for collective deliberation.

3. Transient Diversity, Stalemates, Polarisation

In this section I argue that the arguments described above are based on partial assessments of the psychology and epistemology of disagreement. Once the full picture is brought into view, the psychological literature bearing on the issue shows that individual intellectual and moral virtues of open-mindedness, even-handedness and cooperativeness promote excellence in group deliberation whilst steadfastness and overconfidence do not.

It might be worth pointing out at this stage that some well-known results about group decisions are irrelevant to the case at hand where what is at issue is a collective decision following group deliberation. Thus discussions of “wisdom of the crowd”-like phenomena are beside the point. These concern decisions that are arrived at by aggregating the answers offered by each group member. It is essential though that these individuals have arrived at their view independently of each other so that there should not have been any communication or deliberation on the topic among them (Ladha, 1992).

The relevance of the “Diversity Trumps Ability” theorem is harder to assess. The theorem states that under a set of stringent conditions large groups that adopt diverse strategies of information search outperform even the more knowledgeable among their members. But the theorem only applies to limited circumstances where the group is large, members share a commitment to reaching a consensus on the better conclusion, and all would judge the same outcome to be best when reached (Weymark, 2015). Such conditions mean that the theorem is of limited relevance to the cases under discussion since members might not always agree on what would be the best outcome. Further, a shared commitment to reach a consensus on whatever conclusion is better than others is, I argue below, largely psychologically incompatible with steadfastness and overconfidence. Those who adopt a policy of steadfastness irrespective of whether their view is correct or who overweigh their views are generally driven by wanting to win the argument. They are not committed to seeing that the best view prevails; rather, their goal is to see their point of view triumph.

Hallsson and Kappel, but also Levy, support their conclusions on empirical grounds, as I highlighted above, but they also rely on formal models of disagreement among Bayesian reasoners. More specifically, they point to some formal arguments developed by Zollman (2010) for the epistemic benefit of disagreement for group judgement. Zollman’s models are promising for the defender of the view that group virtue is the outcome of individual vice, because he suggests that groups perform better when prior to deliberation its members hold extreme opinions or when there is much information that is not widely shared among them. He thus concludes that sub-optimal individual performance is required to achieve the best group performance. In addition, and also supporting the line of argument pushed by Levy and by Hallsson and Kappell, Zollman does not attribute any cooperative motivation to group members.

Despite appearances to the contrary, Zollman’s idealised models offer no succour to defenders of the epistemic value of either steadfastness (irrespective of correctness) or of overconfidence. There are two reasons for this conclusion. First, as Zollman explains, the epistemic benefits of diversity only occur when individuals’ views are extreme but information is wholly shared or alternatively when information is unevenly shared but opinions are not extreme. However, when both conditions apply, epistemic diversity becomes entrenched rather than transient. When that happens, a group’s performance is worse than that of its constituent members.

This scenario is precisely the case constructed by Hallsson and Kappel since they invoke steadfastness to promote a division of labour in information searches. Under these conditions group members suffer from asymmetries of information because they have searched different portions of informational space. Hence, information is not wholly shared. But further, they also exhibit a reluctance to change one’s view. Steadfastness thus mimics extremity of opinion because both result in continued adherence to the opinion one held prior to deliberation. This is a recipe for promoting stalemates in discussions and making the reaching of a consensus on a good quality judgement impossible.

Second, Zollman’s deliberators are not steadfast in their opinions; rather, they rationally update their credences in the light of the evidence. They are, that is, Bayesian thinkers. This feature also makes them a bad model for the reasoners envisaged by Hallsson and Kappel. The steadfast reasoner is someone who discounts the evidence; Zollman’s deliberators take it into account. However, these perfect Bayesians start with rather extreme priors and, for this reason, a lot of counter-evidence is required for them to change their opinion. [[10]](#endnote-10) Nevertheless, once they have acquired sufficient evidence, they change their views. There is no such rational tipping point for the steadfast reasoner envisaged by Hallsson and Kappel. For this reason also their recommendations if followed would promote entrenched disagreements.

One may also question the applicability of Zollman’s idealised model to real-life situations where group members make reasoning errors, hold prejudicial views, are uncooperative and have goals that are unrelated to achieving a correct group judgement. Power dynamics among groups members are also salient as is group structure. These considerations also cast doubt on the plausibility of the claim that steadfastness promotes good quality debates. These doubts are strengthened by the examination of the psychological, and especially social psychological, literature on the topic.

Experiments that highlight the benefits that accrue to groups where there is diversity of opinion mostly concern diversity that precedes deliberation rather than disagreement that survives during it, as would be the case with steadfast debaters (see for example, Schulz-Hardt et al., 2006; Schulz-Hardt et al., 2000). There is evidence that the presence of dissenters is beneficial in some group tasks, but these are similar to brainstorming exercises where participants are asked to generate innovative ideas independently of their feasibility (De Dreu et al., 2008, p. 35). Activities of this sort are different in kind from problem-solving or deliberations with a view to converging onto the truth. Further, and in direct opposition to the hypothesis formulated by Hallsson and Kappel, recent work on group deliberation strongly suggests that imperviousness to others’ points of view is detrimental to reaching a collective judgement of good quality (De Dreu et al., 2008).

In particular, this work focuses on the importance of motivation as a determinant of behaviour in group deliberation. This research, which has been reviewed by De Dreu et al. (2008), clearly indicates that, when participants engage in systematic deliberation rather than rely on heuristics, those groups whose members are motivated to cooperate outperform groups whose motivations are individualistic. These results chime with more recent work by Fisher and Keil (2016) that convincingly shows that groups whose members are determined to win the argument do worse than groups whose participants are motivated to learn together and from each other because their deliberations tend to end in stalemates.

There is, of course, no logical contradiction between being motivated to learn from other people and adopting a policy of remaining steadfast in one’s opposing opinion. Nevertheless, the psychological tension is stark. It is hard to see how one would implement a policy of not changing one’s mind when presented with opposing views without adopting a mindset of ignoring, discounting or dismissing others’ reasons. These attitudes promote a tendency not to listen or evaluate fairly opposing points of views.[[11]](#endnote-11) Such a tendency systematically obstructs learning from others.

In addition, the research on the motivation to win arguments points to this motivation being determinant of behaviours indicative of steadfastness in one’s opinion. It also suggests that resistance to contrary views is often accompanied by other morally dubious behaviours such as derogation of others’ opinions, deceit and point-scoring. These behaviours are associated with poor group performance (De Dreu & van Knippenberg, 2005; De Dreu et al., 2008). In sum, the motivation to win arguments could explain steadfastness in debate. But this motivation is responsible for poor deliberative performance.

It might be thought that one might be motivated to adopt a policy of steadfastness, having reasoned that its adoption is epistemically beneficial and without treating debates as competitions with winners and losers. It is certainly possible that a person might reason herself to this position. But once she has reached it, she can only implement her policy by avoiding any serious engagement with other points of view to avoid the risk of being persuaded to change her mind. Either way, one needs to close one’s mind to the possibility of learning from others.

It is also worth noting that steadfastness in debate tends to produce negative reactions in one’s respondents. People do not like discussing matters with unresponsive individuals. Hence, in ordinary settings when one encounters such people no deliberation takes place because it is, often warrantedly, thought to be a waste of time. Sadly, adversarial steadfastness is often praised in philosophy where it is presumed to be truth-conducive. But it is at best unclear why this practice would lead to better results than engagement in techniques of argument repair where all contribute to improving the arguments for a point of view (even when one does not subscribe to it) (Hundleby, 2019). I suspect that steadfastness (irrespective of the truth of one’s view) in debate might seem to some a good policy, because in philosophy debates are often used to establish pecking orders of smartness. When the point of the debate is not to find the truth, but to find a winner, then steadfastness, arrogance and cockiness might be treated as admirable features.[[12]](#endnote-12) However, the epistemic value of this practice is at best doubtful.

It might be objected that the epistemic benefits of steadfastness accrue to the bystanders that witness the debate. This audience would thus be presented with the best arguments for both side. This would help them achieve a better quality judgement than they would have if they had not listened to the combative debate. Whilst there is something to be said for this observation, it offers little succour to the defenders of the benefits of steadfastness to collective deliberation. Any alleged benefits of the debate accrue to individuals rather than to the group itself. In addition, if as the empirical research indicates, psychologically speaking steadfastness is often associated with a desire to win the debate, then it is at best unclear whether witnessing such sparring contexts is of much benefit to bystanders. Debaters with this motivation are not averse to derogation, to misleading assertions, to playing confidence tricks and playing dirty in other ways. Those who witness these debates stand to be misled and misinformed as much as they stand to learn.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Psychological research also raises doubts about the overall epistemic benefits resulting from epistemological individualism. Overconfidence in individuals’ abilities is unlikely to lead to a tendency to attempt to develop alternative views to an existing consensus unless it is also an expression of self-certainty as well as certainty about one’s attitudes to a range of topics. Further, there is robust evidence that attitude certainty is predictive of increased self-certainty (Clarkson et al., 2009), of attitude extremity (Howe & Krosnick, 2017), and of resistance to persuasion which in turns makes one’s attitude even more certain (Tormala, 2016; Tormala & Petty, 2004; Tormala & Rucker, 2007).

The relation of overconfidence to belief extremity should lead us to expect a link between overconfidence and issue polarisation. This expectation is not undermined by evidence that suggests that polarisation is often caused by the motivation to belong to an affinity group (Kahan, 2013; Talisse, 2019). On the contrary, it is plausible that individuals who develop overconfidence in themselves and their views despite the emerging group consensus might feel a sense of affinity for other minority members of the group or for other groups altogether. The lesson to be learnt from these cases, as from the examples discussed by Hallsson and Kappel, is that the behaviours of those who do not conform but adopt a minority position are not best explained by alleged cognitive biases that are common to all subjects since, especially in the case of overconfidence, these individuals behave differently from other group members. The most fitting explanation of this phenomenon must make reference to personality or situational variables that uniquely affect the individuals in question. Motivational differences, whether caused by different personalities or circumstances, have emerged as the most likely explanantia in all of these cases.

I hasten to add, least what I have said has given the wrong impression, that the view defended here does not entail that individuals who debate issues with others must always conciliate. There might be good epistemic reasons to stand up for one’s opinions. My point instead has been that there no clear epistemic benefits to adopting a policy of steadfastness that is irrespective of the truth of the view for which one wishes to advocate. Further, if one is engaging in collective deliberation in order to try to reach a consensus on the truth or on the best option, as opposed to other forms of debate, both steadfastness and overconfidence are epistemically counterproductive because of their association with the motivation to win arguments.

In conclusion, the considerations offered in this chapter indicate that all things considered, there are no group epistemic benefits resulting from seemingly intellectually arrogant behaviours of group members. Neither steadfast resistance to rational update nor overconfidence leads overall to good results in collective epistemic activities. I have also suggested that an explanation of this outcome is that these behaviours are most likely the products of the motivation to argue to win and to self-enhance. These motivations have been shown to lead to epistemically worse group performance, whilst cooperative motivations such as the desire to learn have been demonstrated to produce the best results (De Dreu et al., 2008; Fisher et al., 2018).

If these considerations are right, what promotes improved collective deliberation are individual epistemic and moral virtues such as open-mindedness, the ability to see the other side, and cooperativeness. The agonistic model that is indirectly endorsed by Hallsson and Kappel and by Levy does not appear to have the benefits that philosophers have often attributed to it.[[14]](#endnote-14)

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1. This is not to deny that in some circumstances groups composed by less knowledgeable individuals can outperform expert groups (Weymark, 2015) nor that in some cases less communication between group members makes group decisions more reliable (Zollman, 2013). What I am objecting to is the claim that individual arrogance and over-confidence are epistemically beneficial to groups. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. It is worth noting that “myside” bias is often thought as a bias of information evaluation rather than information search (Stanovich & West, 2007). In this chapter I follow Mercier and Sperber in thinking of it as concerning exclusively the search of information rather than its assessment. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. There is evidence that people quickly become invested and defensive about their own opinions (Abelson, 1986). Sometimes they also use their beliefs to self-enhance (De Dreu & van Knippenberg, 2005; De Dreu et al., 2008, p. 34). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. However, Mercier and Sperber are well aware of this shortcoming (2017, p. 172). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The fact that tasks such as these are rare in the wild also raises serious questions about the claim that reason is adaptive because groups perform well in activities of this sort. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. This is the case when discussing the answer to the Wason selection test (2017, pp. 211-214) but also when a jury is trying to reach the right verdict in a trial (2017, pp. 270-274). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. On the proviso that the bias exclusively affects information searches. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See Chen et al. (1999) for a description of the sufficiency principle and of the motivational determinants that set a variable threshold that determines how much evidence is required to fix belief. For instance, the motivation to avoid dangers sets a low threshold for believing that something is dangerous. Hence, the resulting belief-forming mechanism suffers from numerous false positives. This is to be expected and adaptive in animals who need to defend themselves from predators. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. This policy differs from standard policies of steadfastness in cases of peer-disagreement because it recommends that both parties adopt it rather than claiming that it would be rational for the person who is in fact right to remain steadfast. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. In this regard, it is somewhat misleading for Zollman to describe these deliberators as dogmatic. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Notice that the policy of steadfastness irrespective of the truth of one’s views is thus radically different from the kind of steadfastness adopted by a person upon learning that a peer disagrees. Such a person does not lower her confidence upon learning this fact. But she remains open to changing her mind as the evidence is accumulated. In this cases steadfastness is not a policy and is not adopted irrespective of truth. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Or at least admirable when publicly displayed by members of dominant social groups. These same features might be perceived as inappropriate when exhibited by members of subordinated groups. Hence, the tendency to think of assertive women as aggressive and self-respecting black people of all genders as uppity. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Thanks to Ian Carter for raising this issue. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. I would like to thank Michael Lynch for his comments, and the audiences at the University of Pavia and at the second annual conference of Political Epistemology Network in Amsterdam for their questions. This chapter was supported by a subaward agreement from the University of Connecticut with funds provided by Grant No. 58942 from the John Templeton Foundation. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily represent the official views of UConn or the John Templeton Foundation. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)