

THE EPISTEMIC AIMS OF DEMOCRACY

ABSTRACT

Many political philosophers have held that democracy has epistemic benefits. Most commonly, this case is made by arguing that democracies are better able to track the truth than other political arrangements. Truth, however, is not the only epistemic good that is politically valuable. A number of other epistemic goods – goods including evidence, intellectual virtue, epistemic justice, and empathetic understanding – can also have political value, and in ways that go beyond the value of truth. In this paper, I will survey those who have argued that democracy can be valuable because of these other epistemic benefits, considering (1) the ways in which these epistemic goods can be of political value and (2) the challenges that democracies face in producing them.

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INTRODUCTION

Democratic governments aim to provide a range of *political goods* to their citizens, including protecting human rights, providing military defense, maintaining a just society, and promoting human flourishing.¹ In order to provide these political goods, democracies also seek to secure certain *epistemic goods*. Take the truth, for example. If a government can reliably ascertain the truth on certain issues, then it will be able to more effectively provide its intended political goods. It is obviously very difficult to protect human rights without an accurate list of what those rights are, or to create a just society without knowing something about the principles of justice. Because of the connection between political goods and the truth, a number of philosophers (including Estlund 2007, Goodin and Spiekermann 2018, and Landemore 2012) have argued that democracies are effective at tracking the truth. Hannon (2020: 591) even goes so far as to say that “on the standard interpretation of epistemic democracy, the aim of democracy is to track the truth.” Others that take truth to be the primary target of epistemic arguments for democracy include Goodin (2003: 91), List and Goodin (2001: 277), Müller (2018: 1268), and Peter (2008: 33, 2016a: 133).

Even though truth has been the focus of much political epistemology, it is also worth considering whether democratic institutions lend themselves to promoting any other epistemic goods. In this article, I will survey a range of epistemic goods that democracies might provide – including truth, evidence, intellectual virtue, epistemic justice, and empathetic understanding – along with the connection between these epistemic goods and political goods. With each epistemic good, I will consider answers to two questions:

- (1) Does this epistemic good contribute to political goods?
- (2) What challenges do democracies face in producing this epistemic good?

Answers to our first question will take two primary forms. On the one hand, epistemic goods can be *instrumental political goods*, helping governments secure their fundamental aims without being identical to those aims. Discovering the truth, for example, is not one of the primary reasons that political institutions are established, but truth is valuable because it helps such institutions identify effective policies for securing their primary aims. Now, political institutions might establish committees or task forces for which truth *is* the primary aim, like a committee on climate change or a task force to investigate a particular crime, but these bodies are established because of how they serve specific, more

¹There is a fair bit of disagreement, of course, about which sorts of political goods the state *should* provide. Libertarians, for example, hold that there is only a minimal list of functions that political institutions ought to perform, whereas anarchists think that the state shouldn't play a role in securing any of these supposedly political goods. For the purposes of this paper, I will set aside the normative question of what political goods states should provide and limit my discussion to the sorts of goods that democracies as a matter of fact aim to provide.

fundamental political goals.

On the other hand, epistemic goods can also be *intrinsic political goods* by being identical to some of a government's most fundamental aims.² Consider, for example, intellectual virtue. Developing Aristotle's emphasis on the role of political institutions in enabling human flourishing, Nussbaum (1988, 1990) and Norton (1991) hold that a fundamental aim of political institutions is providing citizens with the capabilities necessary to pursue their vision of the good. Because these capabilities include the intellectual virtues, the intellectual virtues are not just instrumental political goods – they are political goods in their own right. In a similar vein, Farrelly (2018) argues that democracy plays a crucial role in allowing citizens to develop their intellectual virtues, making the practice of democracy itself constitutive of human flourishing. If developing the intellectual virtues of its citizens is one of democracy's fundamental aims, then intellectual virtue is an intrinsic political good.

The second question will then consider potential difficulties that democracies face when generating politically valuable epistemic goods. For example, even though the truth is beneficial for democracies, the rise of fake news and the rapid spread of misinformation on social media has made it more difficult to distinguish truth from falsity. This, then, also makes it more difficult for democratic voting procedures to reach the truth about important matters. Understanding the range of answers to these questions – both which epistemic goods are politically valuable and the challenges democracies face when producing them – will set the stage for future conversations on the epistemic value of democracy.

TRUTH

The focus of many epistemic defenses of democracy is the epistemic good of truth. As we have seen, truth is an important instrumental political good due to the ways that it helps political institutions accomplish their primary aims. But not everyone has agreed that truth is always a political good, as one common concern is that claims to truth are too exclusive for political discourse. Arendt (1967: 114-115) held that, when it comes to politics, “truth has a despotic character” because claiming to have the truth “precludes debate, and debate constitutes the very essence of political life.” Rawls (2005: 94) also took issue with appeals to truth in the public square, holding that it is unnecessarily divisive. Instead, he invoked the idea of the reasonable, which “makes an over-

²The distinction between intrinsic and instrumental political goods is orthogonal to the standard distinction between intrinsic and instrumental goods. Historically, intrinsic goods are taken to be those that are good for their own sake, whereas instrumental goods are valuable due to their connection to intrinsic goods. In some cases, it may be true that intrinsic political goods are also valuable for their own sake, but I make no assumption that this is the case. What I hope to capture, instead, is the difference between goods that make up the fundamental goals of political institutions and those that are valuable only because of how they might help secure these more fundamental aims.

lapping consensus of reasonable doctrines possible in ways the concept of truth may not.”

Despite these concerns, several critics have argued that the political avoidance of truth verges on the incoherent. Raz (1990) thinks that recommending principles of justice is conceptually linked to truth, while Estlund (1998) contends that justifying coercion requires appealing to a true foundation. Cohen (2009) holds that there are several concepts at play in political deliberation – belief, assertion, and reasoning – that are conceptually connected to truth. If these critics are right that truth claims are politically necessary, then how can the truth be made safe for democracy? Landemore (2012: 226-227) makes the case that truth claims need not be made in a way that is coercive or divisive. Rather, citizens can contribute their perspectives in the public square while maintaining intellectual humility and open-mindedness. As Landemore says, “Truth is never coercive [...] only dictators are.” Estlund (2008: 28-29) agrees, arguing that the authority of a despotic ruler must be justified in a way that the authority of truth need not. Goodin and Spiekermann (2018: 307) make it clear that they do not endorse using truth claims to rule out certain perspectives, but only as an endorsement made at the end of the process of political deliberation. In these ways, truth can play a part in the political process without being used to prop up authoritarian discourse.

Another criticism of truth-tracking arguments for democracy is that it is nonsensical to talk about a “true” political policy. Political policies can be more or less effective, but to speak of them as true and false is a category error (Black 1958: 163, Gaus 2011: 273-277, and Miller 1992: 56). In response to this concern, a number of authors have argued all that is needed to make the case for democracy is an independent standard of correctness (Cohen 1986: 34, Estlund and Landemore 2018: 113, Goodin and Spiekermann 2018: 17-18, and Peter 2008: 33). Whether that standard is taking chosen policies to be generally acceptable (Estlund 2008: 23) or to avoid major harms (Estlund 2008: 160-166 and Landemore 2013: ch. 8), democracy can still track these standards when the category of truth seems like a misnomer. All of this then leaves open the possibility that democracy tracks the truth when it comes to these further standards – i.e. that democracy selects policies of which it’s true that they avoid major harms or it’s true that they are generally acceptable.

If truth is a political good, then our second question is what challenges arise in democracy’s pursuit of the truth. Aggregative strategies for defending the connection between truth and democracy emphasize voting as a way of aggregating preferences or beliefs (Peter 2009, 2016b). One approach in this vein, known as Condorcet’s Jury Theorem, holds that larger electorates are more likely to select the best policies and politicians. Condorcet’s theorem depends on a couple assumptions:

- (1) **Competence** - Each citizen is more likely than not to make the

correct vote

(2) **Independence** - Each citizen's vote is probabilistically independent of the votes of other citizens

If both (1) and (2) hold, then as the number of voters increases, the probability that the majority will select the right choice asymptotically approaches 100%. In other words, as long as Condorcet's Jury Theorem applies, sufficiently large democracies can verge on infallibility.³

Now it is obvious that democracies are not infallible, meaning that Condorcet's assumptions do not always hold. Let's start with **Competence**. Political issues are very complex, requiring competency in history, science, and economics to fully understand. But not only do many people not have such broad competency, they typically do not even know the basics about how their political institutions function (Brennan 2018: 91-93 and 2021: 374-376 and Guerrero 2021a: 420-422 and 2021b: 159-160). It is well known that, despite the need for citizens to make informed political decisions, widespread voter ignorance persists in contemporary democracies, with many voters not even able to identify their direct political representatives (Carpini and Keeter 1996 and Schultz 2012). So even though democracies would be infallible if they satisfied Condorcet's assumptions, it is easy to see why they do not.

Another criticism of a Condorcet-style case for democracy is that voters do not form their voting preferences independently because they possess common information (Ladha 1992), engage in group deliberation (Rawls 1971: 358), follow opinion leaders (Boland 1989 and Boland, Proschan, and Tong 1989) or join together in political factions (Estlund et al. 1989: 1318, Grofman and Feld 1988: 571, and Joshi 2020). And when we think about **Independence** more carefully, it's not clear why it would be desirable. Much of what we learn is from testimony, and it would be very surprising if we were able to make good political decisions in complete isolation. This is because, by interacting with one another, we ultimately gain another kind of epistemic good – a wealth of evidence that can lead us to the right political beliefs. These considerations bring out the fundamental tension between **Independence** and **Competence**. If voters do reach their decisions without input from one another, they are not likely to be very competent, whereas if voters are competent, this is because their

³In order to make room for discussing the relationship between democracy and other epistemic goods, I do not discuss two other arguments that have been given to defend the connection between truth and democracy: The Miracle of Aggregation Argument and the Cognitive Diversity Argument. The Miracle of Aggregation Argument holds that ignorant voters will vote randomly, canceling out each others mistakes (Converse 1990, Surowiecki 2004, and Wittman 1995), while the Cognitive Diversity Argument relies on a technical result by Hong and Page (2001, 2004) to argue that large, diverse electorates can outperform small groups of experts (Landemore 2012). For criticisms of the Miracle of Aggregation Argument, see Brennan (2016: 176-179) and (2018: 93). For objections to the Cognitive Diversity Argument, see Ancell (2017), Brennan (2016: 180-194) and (2023b), Gunn (2014), and Stich (2014), and for critiques of the Hong and Page result on which it relies, see Thompson (2014) and Quirk (2014).

knowledge was not reached independently. Even though Estlund (1994) argues that political factions and deliberation do not necessarily undermine the technical sense of probabilistic independence at play in Condorcet's Jury Theorem, Dietrich (2008) shows that even with this more formal notion of independence, **Independence** and **Competence** come into conflict.

EVIDENCE

The tension between **Independence** and **Competence** also brings to the fore the differences between aggregative and deliberative approaches to defending the connection between truth and democracy. While aggregative models highlight the ways that voting can compile citizens' beliefs and preferences, deliberative portrayals of democracy focus on the transformative process of democratic deliberation (Peter 2009, 2016b). One way to frame the contrast between the two is in terms of externalist and internalist emphases in epistemology. Internalists, along with deliberative democrats, typically stress the justification that someone has for their beliefs, while externalists and aggregative democrats highlight the connection between particular processes and truth.

If we are looking at democracy through the deliberative lens, one of the key epistemic goods that we acquire through political deliberation is evidence. By pooling information, we can gather far more evidence about what political policies would be best (Anderson 2006, Bohman 2000: 16, Fearon 1998: 45-49, Marti 2006: 43, and Nino 1996: 117-128). And evidence is a political good due to its connection to truth – the more evidence we have, the better chance we have of figuring out what is true. If true political beliefs are politically valuable, and evidence helps us get to such beliefs, then having access to more evidence is an instrumental political good. One worry about taking evidence to be a political good, of course, is that it is possible to have strong evidence and yet false beliefs. Due to this gap, for example, Gaus (1996: 39, 2011: 273) observes that “there may be a considerable gap between justified belief and truth” and that it is possible to “have perfectly good reason to believe that what is false, and have no reason whatsoever to believe what is true.” Nevertheless, even though it is possible for evidence to be misleading, only if evidence were systematically deceptive would this undermine its value as a dependable guide to truth.

But there is also a way to think of evidence as a political good apart from whether or not we employ an independent standard of correctness such as truth. Taking a pragmatist position, Misak (2000) and Talisse (2007) hold that, simply in virtue of adopting beliefs, we take ourselves to do so on the basis of adequate evidence. But for Misak and Talisse (2014, 2021), the only sort of political arrangement that ensures we have access to adequate evidence is democracy. Only democratic societies give everyone a chance to contribute equally to the shared pool of information – discussing, debating, and sharing their reasons for endorsing competing political policies. Thus, our epistemic commitments make

evidence an intrinsic political good, as we need not characterize its value solely in terms of its connection to truth.

If possessing more evidence is indeed a political good, then the next question is what challenges democracies face when trying to put more information in the hands of political decision-makers. Consider the widespread political ignorance that we considered in the previous section. If deliberation increases the evidence that citizens have for their political beliefs, then why do many voters still remain uninformed? One attempt at explaining this discrepancy is by arguing that such ignorance is actually rational. The chance that an individual's vote makes a difference in terms of which politicians or policies are chosen is extremely small, making it rational for citizens to spend their time on other, more obviously productive activities than gathering political information (Caplan 2007: ch. 4, Downs 1957, and Somin 2013: ch. 3). So even though democracies make more evidence available to political decision-makers, they may not provide sufficiently strong incentives to seek out that information.

Nevertheless, even if citizens do not always have a strong reason to seek out evidence, democracies do create incentives for more people to contribute to the pool of political information. If someone feels like their interests are being neglected, they stand to gain from making this known, especially if their interests align with a political bloc that can influence policy changes. Even in such cases, however, there can still be reasons to keep quiet. Someone might not be believed because of their social standing (for more concerns along these lines, see the section on epistemic justice), or there may be social pressures and penalties against speaking out (Ahlstrom-Vij 2012 and Sunstein 2006). Thus, although democracy does create a political environment where it can be beneficial to share one's reasons for preferring particular political policies, there are still forces that prevent such information from always being shared or received.

INTELLECTUAL VIRTUE

Along with the concern that there might not be enough incentives to share and seek out politically relevant information, another reason that having more evidence might not lead to truth is that more information could backfire by making voters more partisan and biased. While it is intuitive to think that well informed voters will lead to better outcomes, Sunstein (2000, 2002) argues that group deliberation can make voters more, instead of less, polarized. Likewise, Hannon (2022) makes the case that simply being more knowledgeable does not make someone more likely to vote for the best political policies, as some of the most informed voters are also the most partisan. On Hannon's view, along with being knowledgeable about political issues, citizens must also possess the intellectual virtue of objectivity in order to translate that evidence into votes for optimal policies. Aikin and Clanton (2010), Farrelly (2012), Peterson (2022), and Tanesini (2021) concur, arguing that intellectual virtues like

open-mindedness, intellectual humility, and intellectual courage are necessary for productive political discourse.

In the introduction we saw that, because they are partly constitutive of human flourishing, intellectual virtues can be intrinsic political goods. If we think, along with Aristotle, that part of the government's role is to help us form our intellectual and moral characters, then intellectual virtues are political goods in and of themselves. Based on Hannon's observations, though, it is clear that intellectual virtues can also be instrumental political goods. When processing all the evidence provided by democracy, intellectual virtue can help citizens overcome partisan bias and make them more likely to choose the best politicians and political policies. Baehr (2019, 2021) and Brown (2019) agree, arguing that intellectual virtue can help democracies overcome challenges related to everything from uncivil discourse to issues of epistemic trespassing and insularity.

One potential issue is that not all intellectual virtues are necessarily connected to truth. Carter and Gordon (2014), Levy (2006), and Madison (2019), for example, argue that open-mindedness does not necessarily track the truth, while Montmarquet (1987, 1993) holds that intellectual virtues in general are not always truth-conducive. In response, Kwong (2017) has argued that open-mindedness is truth-conducive, while Zagzebski (1996) takes the position that, if we find out a particular intellectual trait is not truth conducive, we should not conclude that the intellectual virtues do not track the truth but should instead cease to think that trait is an intellectual virtue. Despite these concerns, however, even critics of the intellectual virtues acknowledge that they are contingently connected to truth in worlds like ours. Thus, even if there is not a necessary connection between the intellectual virtues and truth, we can still secure their value as instrumental political goods in our political environment.

Because the intellectual virtues have the potential to be both intrinsic and instrumental political goods, our second question is what obstacles democracies must overcome to form citizens in the intellectual virtues. It might be, for instance, that even though the intellectual virtues are necessary for sustaining democracies, they nevertheless are not produced by democracies. Some, like Farrelly (2012, 2018), think that democracies provide their citizens with the ideal environment for developing their intellectual character. In democracies, citizens are thrust into a deliberative process and directly influence which policies and politicians are chosen, an environment that allows them the chance to exercise the intellectual virtues.

But even though democracies provide an environment that, at first glance, is suited to developing the intellectual virtues, there are also many challenges that make the virtues difficult to attain. To begin with, Brennan (2023a: Ch. 5) makes the case that democracy encourages a number of epistemic vices, while Boulton (2021) shows that it is very difficult for individuals to overcome political bias and polarization from the first-person perspective. Furthermore, even if cit-

izens are capable of overcoming their epistemic vices, there might still be good reasons for them to become polarized and avoid the typical intellectual virtues. Singer et al. (2019) contends that polarization can be a rational response to cognitive limitations, Begby (2022) argues that constructing echo chambers can be a strategy for avoiding misinformation and deception, and Dorst (2019, Forthcoming) holds that polarization can be rational in the face of ambiguous evidence. And these effects do not necessarily change as a citizen's evidence grows, as Nielsen and Stewart (2021) make the case that polarization can be rational even in the face of an infinitely increasing body of shared evidence. Battaly (2018, 2021) even argues that, in epistemically hostile environments, it might be necessary to be close-minded. This all suggests that intellectual virtues are required as a precursor to a healthy democracies, rather than always being produced by them, and that democratic governments should take an active role in inculcating them as part civic formation.

EPISTEMIC JUSTICE

Along with the intellectual virtues of open-mindedness, intellectual courage, and intellectual humility, there are also intellectual virtues related to what Fricker (2007) has called epistemic injustice. *Testimonial injustice* takes place when a person's credibility is undermined (or exaggerated – see Davis 2016, Lackey 2018, and Medina 2011) because of their social identity, whether that be because of their race, gender, sexuality, etc. *Hermeneutical injustice*, on the other hand, occurs when someone's social group does not equally contribute to the meaning-making activities of society, preventing them from fully understanding and articulating their experiences. In order to right these social ills, Fricker proposes the hybrid intellectual/ethical virtues of testimonial and hermeneutical justice. The person who possesses testimonial justice is able to “reliably neutralize prejudice in her judgments of credibility” (92), while those with hermeneutical justice have “an alertness and sensitivity to the possibility of” hermeneutical injustice (169). These virtues then allow individuals to reliably decrease and eliminate occurrences of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice.

Even though Fricker takes individuals to be the primary bearers of testimonial and hermeneutical justice, Anderson (2012) has argued that political institutions should also be thought of as epistemically just or unjust. She draws a comparison between epistemic justice and distributive justice, holding that, in both cases, individual transactions that on their own seem just can still add up to systematic structural injustices. Bohman (2012) agrees, arguing that the epistemic injustices we encounter are best explained systemically rather than on an individual level. All of this opens up a role for political institutions to create policies and norms that combat structural epistemic injustice, meaning that we should evaluate whether democratic political institutions as well as their citizens are epistemically just. Furthermore, like Sherman (2016), Anderson (2012: 164-168) points out that, since bias can be almost impossible to self-detect, it

can be difficult to form intellectual virtues from the first-person perspective, necessitating that institutions play a role in remedying epistemic injustice.

Just like the other intellectual virtues, testimonial and hermeneutical justice can contribute to political goods in a number of ways. Let's first consider testimonial and hermeneutical justice as institutional virtues. An important aim of the state is to maintain a just society. If Anderson and Bohman are correct that considerations of justice extend to epistemic justice, then the list of intrinsic political goods includes creating a society that is testimonially and hermeneutically just. Another important function of the state is the protection of certain political freedoms, and Fricker (2013) argues that epistemic injustice is a threat to the political freedom of non-domination. Similarly, Lynch (2021) makes the case that it is part of the aim of democracy to "protect and fairly distribute the means by which citizens can pursue true beliefs." Thus, there are further reasons to think that creating an epistemically just state could be an intrinsic political good.

What about testimonial and hermeneutical justice as virtues of individual citizens? A democracy with more epistemically just citizens will be less likely to suppress the testimony of the marginalized, testimony that can then serve as evidence about which political policies will be most effective. Epistemic justice can thus serve the political good of truth by providing more evidence for citizens to consider in deciding how to vote, making it an instrumental political good. Beyond contributing to the political good of truth, if testimonial and hermeneutical justice are constitutive of human flourishing like the other intellectual virtues, then they are also intrinsic political goods. Along these lines, Fricker (2015) has argued that being able to contribute to the shared pool of epistemic resources is a central human capability, making testimonial and hermeneutical justice integral to human well-being.

Because epistemic justice is a political good, we can also consider our second question: What challenges do democracies face in becoming epistemically just? At the institutional level, democracy seems to be custom made to secure testimonial justice for its citizens. Universal enfranchisement allows all citizens to have an equal say in what political policies and candidates are chosen, preventing the crowding out of certain opinions due to bias or prejudice. Kim (2022: 173) holds that "epistemic fairness is one of the founding principles of the democratic institution of voting," while Anderson (2012: 172) simply defines democracy as "universal participation on terms of equality of all inquirers." Medina (2012: 4) takes striving for democracy to be the same as fighting against epistemic injustice, saying that part of the "ongoing struggle toward democracy is the resistance against epistemic injustices." Universal suffrage also creates a mechanism for overcoming hermeneutical injustice, as laws and politicians that are able to speak to the disenfranchised can give voice to the experiences of the oppressed.

When it comes to individuals, on the other hand, the challenges are more pronounced. Dieleman (2015) distinguishes between formal and substantive inclusion in democratic processes, making the case that voting rights only secures formal inclusion for the marginalized who might still be functionally excluded from political deliberation. Catala (2015) holds that political minorities might still be subject to *hermeneutical domination*, a result of hermeneutical injustice in which the dominant political narratives are shaped by the political majority. Furthermore, Liveriero (2020) examines practices like gerrymandering that, though abiding by formal inclusion, are put in place by individuals seeking to blunt the epistemic power of the oppressed. Thus, even though voting rights may contribute to remedying some epistemic injustices, democracy does not automatically resolve all of the issues related to epistemic injustice.

EMPATHETIC UNDERSTANDING

When it comes to representing the world and those around us, we are not just interested in having true beliefs. We are also interested in understanding, an epistemic status that is a bit more demanding. It is possible, for instance, to know how our political opponents will vote but still not understand the underlying reasons why they do so. Filling in this gap, Hannon (2020: 597) has recently argued for the importance of *empathetic understanding* – understanding “the meaning of an action from the actor’s point of view.” Others who have emphasized the political value of empathetic understanding include Goodin (2000, 2003), Krause (2008), Medina (2013), Morrell (2010), Read (2021, 2023), Sodoma and Sharp (2023), and Stanley (2015).

Empathetic understanding can a political good by reducing polarization and giving us access to more evidence. As Morrell (2010: Ch. 5) shows, without empathetic understanding, we are more prone to political polarization and more likely to portray others as ignorant or malicious, failing to appreciate the actual reasons for what they believe. With an increase in empathetic understanding, though, comes a decrease in animosity towards our political opponents, allowing the deliberative nature of democracy to more effectively do its work, giving us access to the evidence that others voters cite for their political beliefs. At the same time, however, Cassam (2023: 225) has argued that empathetic understanding also has the potential to make polarization worse. If we empathize with our political opponents and find their perspective abhorrent, then we may be less likely to listen to them in the future, a point which Hannon (2022: 599) concedes.

But empathetic understanding isn’t only directed at improving *our political beliefs*. Instead, it’s primary goal is to more accurately represent the *beliefs and intentions of others* (Hannon, 2020: 606-607), a task which Lepoutre (2022) argues is potentially compatible with believing falsehoods. This reveals that empathetic understanding can have value even apart from its connection to

truth. One way that this occurs is the role that empathetic understanding plays in developing the intellectual virtues. Hannon (2020: 606) observes that those with less empathetic understanding “will exhibit a variety of epistemic vices, such as close-mindedness, dogmatism, self-deception, and superficiality of thought,” and Medina (2013: 80-81) argues that empathy is a necessary ingredient for overcoming testimonial injustice. Grimm (2018) considers the ways that understanding itself can be an intellectual virtue, and Shady (2022) argues that empathy meets all of the criteria for being considered an intellectual virtue. To the extent that intellectual virtues are intrinsic political goods, then, empathetic understanding can be taken to be an intrinsic political good as well.

It seems clear enough that empathetic understanding is an important political good, but does democracy reliably produce it? It may be that, like with other intellectual virtues, empathetic understanding is a necessary precursor to healthy democratic dialogue but that democratic deliberation itself does not make people more empathetic. Gronlund et al. (2017) set out to test precisely this question, finding that deliberation amongst small group participants with mixed opinions *does* lead to notable increases in outgroup empathy. Of course, the setting for this study differed from the experiences of most democratic citizens, as each small group discussion had a trained moderator and rules for respectful engagement. Nevertheless, we can still say that democratic-style conversations can lead to increased empathetic understanding in some cases. Furthermore, Mutz and Mondak (2006) found that workplace dialogue was effective in helping citizens better understand their political opponents, while Goodin (2000, 20003) and Habermas (1990) suggest that, in the absence of dialogue, some empathetic understanding can also be gained from imaginative perspective-taking.

Despite this suggestive empirical research, one obvious concern is that our current political environment has resulted in rampant polarization and outgroup antipathy, suggesting that democracy alone is not sufficient for increasing empathetic understanding. Along with the fact that it is more challenging to empathize with outgroup members (Cikara et al. 2014), we face a dilemma of who to burden with bridging social inequalities. Mackenzie and Sorial (2022) argue that, if we place that burden on those who are systematically oppressed, they may not be able to fully communicate their experiences given the systemic effects of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. Furthermore, Berenstain (2016) makes the case that this would constitute a form of *epistemic exploitation* – “unrecognized, uncompensated, emotionally taxing, coerced epistemic labor.”

On the other hand, if we instead depend on the socially privileged to take the perspective of the oppressed via imaginative simulation, as suggested by Goodin and Habermas, then we run the risk of inaccurate projection. If the socially privileged have not interacted enough with other social groups, then they will likely fill this knowledge gap with unhelpful stereotypes or caricatures (Mackenzie 2006 and Scudder 2016, 2020). Due to such challenges, it might be

best to hold, with Hannon (2020: 601), that at the very least such understanding “ought to be a conscious goal of democratic deliberation.” If this is right, then it is imperative to make empathy a goal of democratic education (McGregor 2004 and Morrell 2007) rather than expecting it to arise organically within democratic political cultures.

CONCLUSION

Truth is far from the only politically valuable epistemic good. Alongside truth, evidence, intellectual virtue, epistemic justice, and empathetic understanding also have political value. Sometimes, this value is because of the ways that these other epistemic goods are connected to truth, but in many cases, these other epistemic goods have political value that is not reducible to that of truth, opening the door to further explorations of the epistemic value of democracy.

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