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From the Editor

It is a pleasure to be able to bring you the first issue of *Political Epistemology*, published by the Ideas, Knowledge, and Politics section of the American Political Science Association.

The section itself was originally called “Political Epistemology,” but the inaugural Council decided that it would be best to change the name to specify our desire to bring together two related streams of research in political science and political theory. Only one of these is, narrowly speaking, the stream of research on political actors’ knowledge or ignorance—the stream captured most neatly by the term *epistemology*.

In empirical work, that stream has ancient origins, but its contemporary iteration can be traced to the Michigan school’s *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960). Later landmarks include Page and Shapiro’s *The Rational Public* (1992), Zaller’s *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (1992), Delli Carpini and Keeter’s *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters* (1996), and Achen and Bartels’s *Democracy for Realists* (2016). Achen and Bartels, however, shift from the question of voters’ *knowledge* to the question of their *ideas*, which may be under- or misinformed and may therefore not constitute knowledge. Ideational research constitutes the second stream.

In empirical political science, ideational research, too, stretches back to the Michigan school, which paired its exploration of voters’ knowledge or ignorance with the question of how even uninformed voters come to have political attitudes, identities (such as partisan identity), and well- or ill-formed ideologies. This ideational current of research has in recent years flowered, as well, in the study of comparative politics and international relations.

In political theory there is also a division between strictly epistemic and more broadly ideational research. Epistemic democrats such as Hélène Landemore (*Democratic Reason*, 2012) and Robert Goodin and Kai Spiekermann (*An Epistemic Theory of Democracy*, 2019) have argued, against the grain of empirical work on public opinion, for the beneficial epistemic effects of democracy. Separately, there is a critical ideational stream that begins with Marx and includes most Western Marxists and feminists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Anyone who, like these writers, attempts to understand how bad ideas, false consciousness, and ideology come to exist in particular types of society (e.g., bourgeois or patriarchal) is a participant in this stream. My own work on technocracy (*Power Without Knowledge*, 2019) tries to merge ideational and epistemic research by focusing, for example, on such paradoxes as highly knowledgeable technocrats who nevertheless have bad ideas that may lead to counterproductive public policies.

Why should the epistemic and ideational streams be brought together in one organized section? In my view (speaking, as always, for myself only, not for the section), bringing them together can point the way toward a rather dramatically revamped political science, both empirical and normative, that is far more in touch with political realities than contemporary political science tends to be. Contemporary political science tends to overlook the fact that all conscious political action must be predicated on political actors’ normative ideas (about the way things should be) and their empirical ideas (about the way things are and the way they are likely to be after political action occurs). Ideational research, then, should be foundational to our discipline, but currently it is peripheral. In addition, whenever one *disagrees* with someone else’s political idea, one is saying that the normative or empirical knowledge claim embodied in the idea is inaccurate. This type of epistemic criticism is the bread and butter of political contestation. Thus, in my view, the study of politics should be both ideational and epistemological. Whether we want

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to understand conscious political action or prescribe it, we will be trying to explain or trying to advance ideas that are, simultaneously, knowledge claims. “Knowledge” is always embodied in knowledge claims, which are a type of idea. Conversely, political ideas are rarely seen as fantasies by those who hold them; instead they are seen as true, i.e., they are knowledge claims.

Our first issue exemplifies the potentially wide scope of “political epistemology” as a portmanteau covering research on both ideas and knowledge (or ignorance). Adam Lerner’s paper on the concept of uncertainty in international relations has implications for all subfields of political science, as, arguably, all political actions rest on the uncertain knowledge—the possibly false knowledge claims and assumptions—of fallible political actors. Judith Lichtenberg’s paper raises the question of whether the political crisis we are now confronting, both in the United States and elsewhere, is foundationally epistemic, in the sense that it rests on the propagation through the mass media of false knowledge claims that, as “post-truth” analyses hold, are in some sense not even intended to be true. Finally, my reply to Lichtenberg challenges the post-truth analysis by arguing that if we attend to the actual ideas of those who, according to that analysis, do not care about the truth, we find that in fact they care about it very much, even if, epistemically, they have very much gotten it wrong.

Future issues of *Political Epistemology* would benefit from readers’ ideas about how to improve it and their proposals for future articles, dialogues, and other contributions. We could also do with some help in writing future From the Literature columns on comparative politics, given the time commitments of the current authors. Finally, we really ought to have From the Literature columns on interpretivism, feminist epistemology, post-structuralism, American Political Development, and perhaps other research tendencies or subfields as well. This won’t happen unless our members make it happen, so I very much look forward to hearing from you. ■

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Unpredictability in International Politics: Risk, Uncertainty, and Complexity

Adam B. Lerner

ABSTRACT: *What are the ontological and epistemological roots of unpredictability in politics? How can scholars simultaneously grapple with the conundrums posed by unpredictable actors and the larger, ever-changing systems they shape? To answer these questions, unpredictability can be divided into three buckets—risk, uncertainty and complexity—that can be interpreted according to varying traditions in the philosophy of science. When applied empirically, this typology helps to contextualize analysis and expose often-overlooked contours of U.S. foreign policy-making.*

In his first major foreign policy speech in Washington, D.C., presidential candidate Donald Trump (2016) offered the following remarks on fighting the Islamic State (ISIS):

I have a simple message for [ISIS]. Their days are numbered. I won’t tell them where and I won’t tell them how. We must as a nation be more unpredictable. We are totally predictable. We tell everything. We’re sending troops. We tell them. We’re sending something else. We have a news conference. We have to be unpredictable. And we have to be unpredictable starting now.

Although Trump had previously offered rambling remarks on the virtues of his own unpredictability (see, e.g., Haberman and Sanger 2016), this speech was perhaps the campaign’s first formal declaration of how he would translate his personal erraticism into foreign

policymaking. In the coming weeks, numerous commentators began referring to this as a declaration of Trump’s “unpredictability doctrine” (Saletan 2016; Alderman and Schweitzer 2016), inspiring a debate on the costs and benefits of unpredictable policymaking processes. Those opposed to Trump’s candidacy wrote that unpredictability would betray allies and squander American power, while others compared the doctrine favorably to Nixon’s Machiavellian “Madman Theory,” which sought to strategically convince adversaries that the president was impulsive and unpredictable as part of a larger strategic manipulation (Swaim 2016; Krauthammer 2017).

However, inspiring a belief in one’s unpredictability is quite different from actually *being* unpredictable—Trump’s stated goal, as well as a frequent description of his personal behavior by those who know him best (see McManus 2019a). Commentators were left wondering whether Trump was playing political chess by feigning unpredictability, or whether his foreign policy advisers had

simply crafted a *post hoc* rationalization for a candidate prone to overturning the chessboard and swallowing the pieces. This was, after all, a prearranged speech delivered from a teleprompter.

Beyond these questions of Trump's intent, any debate over unpredictability "doctrines" must wrestle with the numerous questions implicit in *theorizing* unpredictability. A few stand out as particularly relevant. First, is a foreign policy doctrine of unpredictability not analogous to worrying about being less anxious, or putting a reminder in one's calendar to be more spontaneous? Presidential doctrines are, after all, expressions of grand strategy that guide policymaking (Colucci 2018). Can one impose unpredictability on policymaking processes or does unpredictability necessarily stem from a lack of planning? Second, and relatedly, does an unpredictability doctrine necessarily decline in efficacy over time as data accumulates? As an unpredictable president provides more evidence of his or her erraticism, would he or she then become more predictable? Third, can scholars theorize the merits and demerits of unpredictability in itself, or must they restrict their analyses to actors' perceptions of it? Though unpredictability may preclude nomothetic causal explanations, can scholars nonetheless understand its ontic status, or is this status inherently epistemic? How can scholars cogently theorize unpredictability without succumbing to foolhardy certainty regarding unknowable philosophical foundations (Monteiro and Ruby 2009) that IR scholars have imported from the philosophy of science?

In this article, I address these questions and, in so doing, offer two fundamental contributions. Recognizing that different philosophy-of-science traditions inform differing outlooks on unpredictability, I will first articulate a novel, unifying typology of political unpredictability. Instead of committing to imponderable ontological and epistemological assumptions about the roots of unpredictability, this typology divides unpredictability into three buckets—risk, uncertainty, and complexity—that are adaptable across the perspectives on the philosophy of science that dominate politics scholarship. Second, to demonstrate the utility of this typology not only in theoretical reflection, but also in empirical analysis, I will apply it to an analysis of Trump's unpredictability doctrine, as it was articulated by the former president and argued about by leading foreign-policy commentators. The debate about Trump will serve as a critical case demonstrating the typology's usefulness in dispelling confusion about unpredictability and illuminating frequently overlooked aspects of both Trump's unpredictability and the unpredictability of a world shaped by an erratic and impulsive leader.

The first two sections offer what may seem a lengthy (but, I hope, warranted) philosophical detour on unpredictability and political epistemology. In the first, I demonstrate how the application of different philosophy-of-science traditions to politics scholarship implies different visions of both the limitations of prediction and the nature of unpredictability. In the third through fifth sections, I outline a unifying typology of risk, uncertainty, and complexity, and suggest that it can provide a prudent conceptual framework for even the most ardent partisans of differing philosophical approaches. In the sixth and final section, I return to Trump's unpredictability doctrine. Drawing on the three-buckets typology, I demonstrate that, while commentators often describe Trump's unpredictability by implicitly fitting it into the deterministic risk/uncertainty spectrum, these interpretations are liable to break down as time horizons increase and the scope of analysis

widens. Alternatively, the non-deterministic paradigm of complexity may offer a richer, more complete understanding of Trump's unpredictability for scholars interested in increasing its vantage or lengthening its timeframe into the Biden era. I conclude by reflecting on how thinking about unpredictability should promote epistemic humility among both scholars and policymakers.

I. What Is Unpredictability?

Part of the initial difficulty of defining and investigating unpredictability stems from the varied conceptualizations and terminology that scholars of differing orientations use to refer to overlapping conceptual terrains. For example, while statistically oriented disciplines typically describe unpredictable realms via the language of variance, stochastic processes, error terms, and uncertainty (as distinct from "risk"), philosophers may refer to epistemological limits on prediction posed by longstanding dilemmas like the problem of induction or the problem of other minds. In the social sciences, these issues are often compounded by the unique nonlinear dynamics of social systems (see Kiel and Elliott 2009; Jervis 1998; Hoffmann and Riley 2002) and the practical limitations placed on data collection by sensitive subject matter. Each of these different angles alludes to underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions, yet oftentimes these assumptions go unstated and thus differing approaches remain siloed.

For the purposes of this article, I begin with the general umbrella term *unpredictability* because prediction carries a vaunted status in debates on the scientific status of social sciences that, I believe, are in need of critical re-examination. In turn, I will problematize unpredictability by means of a critical typology to help bring epistemological humility to debates that are stuck in deeply entrenched stalemates.

Some political science literature on uncertainty and strategic unpredictability has already outlined various approaches and typologies, but this work's lack of explicit engagement with the philosophy of science often limits the robustness of its conclusions. For example, Brian C. Rathbun (2007) theorizes what he sees as prevailing conceptualizations of "uncertainty" in four key IR theoretical paradigms: political realism, rationalism, cognitivism, and constructivism. But his omission of these paradigms' roots in different philosophy-of-science assumptions creates significant confusion, inhibiting the durability of his analysis as these paradigms develop. For example, he argues that a vision of uncertainty as stemming from fear is quintessentially realist, neglecting how fear, like all emotions, stems from *interpretations* of given situations as frightening, such that fear-based uncertainty is grounded in the subjectivity emphasized by cognitivist, constructivist, and critical accounts (see Bleiker and Hutchison 2008; Bar-Tal 2001; Crawford 2014). Similarly, his division between individually oriented cognitivist approaches and constructivist approaches that focus on a reified intersubjective realm neglects significant constructivist work on the interpersonal micro-foundations of ambiguity and uncertainty (e.g., Crawford 2000; Ross 2006), as well as work dissecting how individual emotions spread, forming macro-level group properties (Sasley 2011; Mercer 2014).

Similarly, a separate literature that spans American politics, security studies, and foreign-policy analysis centers on the strategic utility of feigned unpredictability (Nixon's and, perhaps, Trump's madman theory). This literature analyzes how decision-makers

deceive adversaries by deliberately offering misleading signals or defying expectations (McManus 2019; Vinci 2005; Roy 1994). This literature, correctly in my view, implicitly assumes that unpredictability always involves a subject and a perceiving object and thus, again, entails subjective processes of perception and interpretation. However, it is also important to delineate second-order questions about who specifically can predict what and when from first-order ontological and epistemological questions about which things are predictable (in the abstract) and why. Assessing the former is impossible without first theorizing the latter. The necessity of addressing both questions becomes apparent in real-world cases such as that of Donald Trump, whose behavior prompted debate about whether he was truly unpredictable or whether his unpredictability was a Machiavellian act used to deceive opponents, as the madman theory specifies (Nedal and Nexon 2017; Patrick 2017). In the final section, in which I examine this case, I demonstrate how these distinct questions can fruitfully be brought into conversation by means of a clarified typology.

Given the theoretical confusion over the meaning, roots, and effects of unpredictability, conceptual clarity must begin by returning to the philosophy-of-science traditions that frame how scholars understand prediction and its limitations. In the next section, then, I will outline how three of these traditions, which are popular across political-science subfields—neopositivism, social constructivism, and critical realism—conceive of the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of unpredictability. Though certainly not a comprehensive overview of the diverse philosophy-of-science positions invoked and defended by politics scholars, this section does offer a broad overview of what many scholars imply when they invoke the term and its cognates in their analysis, paving the way for a unified approach. Such an approach, I argue, must recognize how assumptions wedded to philosophy-of-science traditions shape notions of unpredictability, but must also build bridges between camps via a clarified vocabulary.

II. Unpredictability in Three Philosophy of Science Traditions

A good starting point for understanding views on unpredictability from the first tradition I will consider, neopositivism, is *Designing Social Inquiry* (1994)—King, Keohane, and Verba’s methodological “bible,” taught around the globe.

KKV (1994, 59) outline two extremes on a continuum of perspectives regarding “random variation,” a term that they use relatively interchangeably with “high variance” and “unpredictability”:

Perspective 1: A Probabilistic World. Random variation exists in nature and the social and political worlds and can never be eliminated. Even if we measured all variables without error, collected a census (rather than only a sample) of data, and included every conceivable explanatory variable, our analyses would still never generate perfect predictions. A researcher can divide the world into apparently systematic and apparently non-systematic components and often improve on predictions, but nothing a researcher does to analyze data can have any effect on reducing the fundamental amount of nonsystematic variation existing in various parts of

the empirical world.

Perspective 2: A Deterministic World. Random variation is only that portion of the world for which we have no explanation. The division between systematic and stochastic variation is imposed by the analyst and depends on what explanatory variables are available and included in the analysis. Given the right explanatory variables, the world is entirely predictable.

These two perspectives differ in their fundamental views of contingency. Perspective 1 sees contingency as an ontological condition for researchers to confront in certain (limited) systems in the world, whereas perspective 2 sees it as merely an epistemological condition, driven by the inevitable incompleteness of researchers’ data and models. Yet the authors’ emphasis on significant regions of social systematicity and predictability that should guide social science (as well as, potentially, policymaking) turn the dichotomy between the two perspectives into a distinction that makes no practical difference. Thus, KKV (1994, 59–60, emphasis original) argue that the two perspectives are “*observationally equivalent*,” and problematically suggest that “most political scientists,” who fall between the two extremes, can ignore the difference. However, the two philosophical positions that are posited as extremes actually share many contentious commonalities from which many political scientists would legitimately dissent. For example, both perspectives regard social science as the hunt for those extensive portions of the social world that are amenable to prediction, and both are broadly dualist in that they base notions of unpredictability on a division between the mental world of predictive analysis and the material world to be predicted (Jackson 2009; Lerner 2020a). Further, both are relatively inattentive to the fundamental limitations placed on prediction by their essentially Humean conceptualization of causation, which, by limiting inquiry into underlying mechanisms, constantly risks conflating correlation with causation (Gerring 2010, 1520). Finally, both views neglect how the presence of non-linear, complex systems may confound such a sharp division between systematic and non-systematic components of the world.

A second key set of philosophy-of-science views goes under the label of social constructivism (Jackson 2009). Although IR “constructivists” may be either neopositivists or critical realists (Jackson 2011, 201–7; 2009), the philosophy-of-science tradition known as social constructivism best applies to *critical* constructivists and poststructuralists who believe that knowledge claims are irreducibly shaped by subjectivity. This perspective entails the belief that theory and knowledge are deeply intertwined in any research program (see, e.g., Zehfuss 2002), and it is hospitable to a scientific ontology that emphasizes intersubjective “social facts” as vital forces shaping politics at multiple levels (Pouliot 2004). Because social facts are continually interpreted and rearticulated, social constructivists emphasize that they are ill suited to the type of systematic analysis championed by KKV. Thus, social constructivism adds a new dimension of unpredictability beyond the problems of inference motivating neopositivists. In essence, this dimension has to do with the epistemological limitations of subjectivity. If intersubjective realms of social facts must be interpreted by subjectively biased researchers, then scholarship will *necessarily* face epistemological limits on both its analyses and its predictions.

Subjectivity limits access to the hypothetical pristine objective realm that would be necessary for reliable determinations of what the future may hold. Thus, social constructivists accept an indeterminacy in the social world that prevents robust predictive analysis.

The critical realist paradigm brings a third, distinct realm of unpredictability into politics scholarship, stemming from its commitment to unobservable realms of causal properties and its rejection of the closed models of neopositivism (Patomaki and Wight 2000; Wight 2006, 51–52). The distinctive form of unpredictability highlighted by critical realists stems from the gap between the “real” world of unobservable causal properties and the empirical world of observed causal actualization. For critical realists, analysis that recognizes unactualized causal properties must grapple with contingency—the world of what could have or would have been due to real, underlying, but unfulfilled causal potentialities—in addition to the world of what actually did occur. Unlike in neopositivists’ Humean account of causation, which is defined by the observation of constant conjunction, causes in critical realism are only sometimes actualized and, even when actualized, only sometimes observed or observable. Many potential causes remain inaccessible, limiting prediction. Further inhibiting prediction, critical realists believe in multiple interacting layers of reality, from the material to the biological to the social, each with its own emergent causal properties. While material and biological realms’ causal properties can be probed via scientific experimentation, social systems are fundamentally *open*, with actors “capable of communication and creativity and resistance” (Gorski 2013, 662). Thus, social sciences’ inability to conduct controlled, closed experiments in fundamentally open systems inhibits their capacity to probe and *predict* social causation. At best, a critical realist’s explanation can provide “an account of what *did* happen,” but it will be ill-suited to decontextualized predictions of what *will* happen across time and space (Jackson 2011, 111; see also Wight 2006, 51–52). Unpredictability in this vision thus stems not only from the limitations emphasized by neopositivists and social constructivists, but also from the powerful but unobservable realm of causal mechanisms.

Though certainly not comprehensive, this review of the ideas of unpredictability implied by the three philosophy-of-science traditions helps reveal just how nebulous the concept of unpredictability is for social scientists. Sometimes scholars interpret “unpredictability” as referring to philosophical ontology, whereas at other times it refers to scientific ontology (Jackson 2008). In still other cases, “unpredictability” refers to epistemological limitations or a simple information deficit. While scholars routinely write cogently about unpredictability and even offer quantitative assessments of it, without defending their unstated assumptions about its nature, this brief review suggests the contentious philosophy-of-science grounds upon which such conclusions often sit.

III. A Unifying Typology: Three “Buckets” of Unpredictability

To summarize, neopositivists tend to describe unpredictability as the result of incomplete data or isolable non-systematic pockets of the world, while social constructivists add the epistemological limitations of subjectivity and intersubjectivity as sources of unpredictability. Critical realists often accept the insights of these two paradigms but add a further layer of unpredictability stem-

ing from the unbridgeable gap between the real and the actual. In addition, there is meta-uncertainty regarding the philosophical foundations that ground the three paradigms’ accounts of knowledge production and its limitations. Assuming that no scholars have access to the fundamental truths of the universe, the assumptions that shape these philosophy-of-science traditions remain “leap[s] of faith” (Monteiro and Ruby 2009, 32). IR scholars have imported multifarious positions from the Philosophy of Science. While making such assumptions might be necessary for framing vital questions of research design and methods selection, scholars must always temper their conclusions with the knowledge that the universe could contain further unknown or unknowable sources of uncertainty. Any division between predictable and unpredictable thus rests on shaky, tendentious grounds.

Given these limitations, epistemological humility is in order. One way to achieve it would be to synthesize multiple perspectives on uncertainty into a unifying, flexible typology.

Such a typology should contain descriptive categories adaptable to a variety of philosophy-of-science underpinnings, bringing together insight from scholars addressing similar conceptual terrain with differing philosophical assumptions in order to further empirical analysis. Yet it should also remain sensitive to how it might be interpreted by differing traditions in the philosophy of science, lest it foster confusion beyond that which characterizes existing debates. Such a typology would help add nuance and focus to discussions of unpredictability, while fostering dialogue across camps whose differing assumptions often inhibit meaningful debate.

My suggestion, then, is that we conceive of three “buckets” of unpredictability: risk, uncertainty and complexity. Though these buckets adapt from scholarship with distinct philosophy-of-science assumptions, they can be used as descriptive categories to orient empirical debates, rather than as implying firm theoretical accounts of the ontological and epistemological roots of uncertainty. Treating them as descriptive allows them to appeal, in varying ways, to all three of the philosophy-of-science traditions I have discussed, making them suitable for bridging divides. Indeed, I have selected the unscholarly term *buckets* precisely because it is not wedded to any philosophical underpinnings. Ultimately, this typology is sufficiently flexible to accommodate a variety of philosophical wagers and research agendas, but clear enough to orient analysis.

IV. The Risk/Uncertainty Spectrum in Deterministic Systems

The first two buckets of unpredictability build upon Frank H. Knight’s (1921) oft-cited distinction between risk and uncertainty. Knight theorized a distinction between objective risks, stemming from systems with known probability distributions, and uncertainty, stemming from systems with unknown probability distributions (Jarvis 2011). However, this distinction has been significantly problematized for numerous reasons.

Two issues stand out for the purposes of this analysis. First, Knight’s own philosophical assumptions preclude any sharp dichotomy between risk and uncertainty. Between these ideal-typical extremes of perfect or imperfect knowledge of probability distributions, there is a dense spectrum stemming from mixed or

incomplete knowledge. Second, as Jack Hirshleifer and John G. Riley point out, the outcome of a coin toss, which Knight viewed as embodying risk, is a stylized example of perfect systematicity, which is discordant with the systems most researchers analyze (Hirshleifer and Riley 1992, 10–12; see also Nelson and Katzenstein 2014, 364–65). Indeed, even a coin toss is only ever *truly* a fifty-fifty prospect if the coin is perfectly fair, but verifying this raises questions that necessitate uncertain philosophical assumptions, undermining the sharp distinction between uncertainty and risk.

To remedy this conundrum, Hirshleifer and Riley reformulate Knight's distinction in terms of Bayesian degrees of subjective belief. On one end, they identify "hard" probabilities about which one has a strong belief in one's own knowledge of the probability distribution; on the other end, "soft" probabilities about which this degree of belief is far lower, non-existent, or (worse) misleading. For example, the authors point out that if one has observed a coin land an approximately equal number of times on both faces after numerous flips,¹ one will likely assign a "hard" probability of 0.5 that it lands on heads the next flip, based on strong subjective belief. However, if one is not able to examine the coin in advance and has no way of knowing whether it is double-headed or double-tailed, one may *still* assign a subjective probability of 0.5 to heads, yet have far less confidence in the belief.

Adhering to the traditional Bayesian norm of rationally updating predictions based on concrete data implies philosophical assumptions that may alienate some schools in the philosophy of science, but an alternative reading of Hirshleifer and Riley's hard/soft distinction helps overcome this limitation. This reading would skirt thorny ontological questions about "true" (objective) underlying probability distributions and epistemological questions about researchers' access to them, instead favoring an emphasis on subjective beliefs and their evolution over time. However, for such an outlook to apply to the complex social realm of politics, it would need to transition from emphasizing solely individual subjectivity to also accepting realms of intersubjectivity.

While some political science literature does interrogate first-image individual decision-making under risk and uncertainty (Byman and Pollack 2001; Hall and Yarhi-Milo 2012), many important political questions concern collective decision-making, including by the state as a corporate person that synthesizes diverse inputs (Wendt 2004; Lerner 2020b). For this reason, we can conceptualize the first two buckets as the ends of a spectrum between risk and uncertainty, defined as extreme intersubjective agreement and extreme disagreement about systems' probability distributions. Risky systems (e.g., coin flips or rolls of the dice) are, in this understanding, those in which overwhelming intersubjective agreement exists as to a presumed probability distribution, whereas uncertain ones (e.g., determining what poetry might be written next year) are those in which, despite significant intersubjective agreement about the parameters of the system in question, none exists about its probability distribution.

Describing risk and uncertainty with the language of intersubjective agreement has several advantages over traditional understandings. First, it circumvents ontological and epistemological questions about whether systems thought to be risky are actually

uncertain due to consequential yet unlikely "black swan" events lurking on their distributions' tails (Taleb 2010). Such systems may be intersubjectively regarded as risky, but new events or compelling arguments may push the consensus toward uncertainty. Second, it avoids epistemological debates over the technical possibility of predicting deterministic chaotic systems that are sensitive to initial conditions.² Given the practical impossibility of measuring initial conditions with perfect precision, these chaotic systems are typically treated, intersubjectively, as random and, thus, as extreme examples of uncertainty. In theory, however, systems with initial conditions understood with perfect precision would be entirely predictable (Kiel and Elliott 2009; Rickles, Hawe, and Shiell 2007; Gleick 1987). Third and finally, this spectrum facilitates a discussion of change over time due to social and scientific progress, as systems once assumed to be risky or uncertain come to be analyzed and understood, with communication facilitating the formation of intersubjective agreement or its dissolution. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that both extremes on this spectrum share the assumption of broad intersubjective agreement over the system's parameters—in other words, they are understood to be deterministic, stemming from fixed initial constraints. This differentiates them from the non-deterministic systems discussed in the next section.

This compromise spectrum helps to craft a useful *détente* between philosophy-of-science positions, facilitating dialogue when the adherents of different schools can agree upon the parameters of a system. While researchers will still inevitably disagree over the extent of risk and uncertainty, this disagreement can bypass dogmatic philosophical debates about the roots of unpredictability in favor of potentially more tractable empirical debates about social knowledge of the systems in question. Further, the spectrum can be made compatible with the philosophical assumptions of neopositivism, social constructivism, and critical realism without undermining its descriptive specificity. Although neopositivists' chief metatheoretical interest is usually in the contrast between risk and uncertainty in "real-world" systems, they have good reason to believe that intersubjective ideas about risky systems with objectively fixed probability distributions will converge to their true values over time. Indeed, this convergence assumption is the basis of most rational-actor models in the social sciences. Thus, accepting the spectrum, for neopositivists, will be akin to accepting lingering anxiety created by the problem of induction. Similarly, while critical realists believe in the ontological primacy of underlying causal mechanisms, they also recognize that our access to these mechanisms is incomplete, as causes so often go unactualized. Thus, an emphasis on the evolution of intersubjective agreement regarding probability distributions reflects the epistemological limitations actors face in gaining access to reality, as well as the complex influence of this lower-order underlying reality on the higher-order, emergent social systems with which prediction is concerned. Finally, although social constructivists may highlight the subjective bias that feeds into intersubjective (dis)agreement, the risk/uncertainty spectrum should appeal to them based on the primacy it grants to subjectivity in framing knowledge production.

1 Though based in different philosophical foundations, this hard-versus-soft distinction, based in observation, rhymes with Blyth's (2006) distinction between observable risk "generators" and unobservable generators of uncertainty.

2 Paradigmatic examples of such deterministic chaotic systems include the weather and population growth under certain constraints.

V. Unpredictability in Non-Deterministic Systems

Part of the problem with Knight's dichotomy (and, to some degree, with Hirshleifer and Riley's Bayesian reformulation) is that it assumes that all systems are intersubjectively understood as deterministic and thus that their unpredictability falls somewhere along the spectrum of risk and uncertainty. But this is not always the case.

Systems' parameters can shift and adapt over time, changing intersubjective understandings of their probability distributions. If all systems are machines dispensing gumballs of several colors, then the spectrum between risk and uncertainty represents the extent of intersubjective agreement or disagreement over the relative quantities of the colors. Some chaotic systems might constantly produce new colors or new patterns of the old colors, leading to ever-changing probability distributions, but the language of intersubjective disagreement or uncertainty would still apply. However, a further set of gumball machines may best be understood as complex adaptive systems, prone to changes over time depending on shifting user preferences. Initially, these machines may seem to produce regular spurts of red, yellow, and blue, but they may realize that their users prefer green gumballs and start producing them. In some instances, the system may report back that new users actually prefer a soda machine, leading to a shift not captured by the initial probability distribution of gumball colors. When there is intersubjective agreement that a system's parameters are open, subject to responsive changes over time, the risk/unpredictability spectrum ceases to be descriptive. Given a narrowly specified set of initial conditions, the idea that a gumball machine would someday spit out soda seems utterly unpredictable, but, given knowledge of changing user requests, the result seems far more likely.

To classify such systems and their unpredictability, I employ the term *complexity* and draw on the ideas of complexity theory, which analyzes the open, non-deterministic complex adaptive systems that permeate the natural and social worlds.

"Complexity" has been invoked across the social sciences to denote various theories, ontologies, and epistemologies. Indeed, the deterministic chaotic equations described in the previous section are often housed under the larger "complexity" umbrella. However, following the example of prominent interpretations of complexity in IR theory (Kavalski 2007; Bousquet and Curtis 2011; Orsini et al. 2019; Jervis 1998), as well as the work of Cristoforo Sergio Bertuglia and Franco Vaio (2005), we can treat complexity as a term that describes a variety of non-linear adaptive, non-deterministic ("open") systems, thus excluding the chaotic systems described in the previous section.

Still, chaotic systems and complex systems share certain key qualities. Both complex and chaotic systems are non-linear, meaning that they cannot be "decomposed into [their] parts and each part solved separately to construct the full solution" (Ricklefs, Hawe, and Shiell 2007, 934). Further, many complex systems share with chaotic systems sensitivity to initial conditions, meaning that slight changes in initial inputs or relationships will, over time, produce drastically different observable outcomes (often labeled the "butterfly effect"). Such sensitivity magnifies the importance of contingency and measurement issues, creating a significant barrier to prediction, even when certain adaptations of parameters can be anticipated. Researchers typically face problems in measuring

initial conditions in complex systems (especially social ones) with enough accuracy to enable predictions of their development.

Within the complexity paradigm, IR scholars have paid particular attention to complex adaptive systems—those that "evolve and adapt to the[ir] environment" (Bertuglia and Vaio 2005, 276). Numerous scholars have argued for understanding durable social structures such as states, financial markets, and international organizations as complex adaptive systems due to their ability to make responsive changes over time (Gunitsky 2013; Oatley 2019; Hoffmann and Riley 2002). Complex adaptive systems differ from chaotic ones in multiple ways that can make their unpredictability even more contingent and complicated than the latter. I will sketch just four of these.

First, complex adaptive systems are fundamentally open to their environments, exchanging information with external sources and allowing for the entrance of new actors and the construction of new relationships. If we try to predict when motorists will reach their destinations we are bedeviled by the openness of the road system, as new waves of cars can enter a highway, new accidents can occur, new construction projects may begin, and motorists can even experience flat tires. In this sense, deterministic approximations from the initial parameters determining complex systems will *inevitably* be incomplete over longer time frames, as no catalogue of variables and relationships, no matter how thorough, will account for all the potential changes that may arise. In this sense, the longer a trip and the more open its routes are to external influences, the more difficult it will be to predict the impact of traffic on motorists' transit time.

Second, complex systems demonstrate a high density of interconnections between their parts, leading to self-organizing and self-reproducing structures. In the case of highway traffic, such self-organization can be seen as akin to "group-think," as waves of drivers rubberneck or switch lanes simultaneously, despite the irrationality of such decision-making. These properties stem from the coevolution of the components of complex adaptive systems, defying the "unit homogeneity" and "conditional independence" assumptions of most deterministic models (see Hoffmann and Riley 2002, 307).

Third, the structures of complex adaptive systems often exhibit emergent properties that are more than the sum of their parts. Such properties, in turn, can exert downward causation, undermining the predictive value of traditional social-scientific linear models. Thus, participants can observe the emergent phenomenon of traffic jams (perhaps via news reports or red warnings on Google Maps) and adapt their behavior accordingly (e.g., by opting instead for public transport or waiting longer to leave), making the prediction of aggregate traffic patterns more difficult. To recognize the causal importance of emergent properties and the related feedback loops of complex adaptive systems is to treat endogeneity as a fact of life, rather than a bug in certain models of life (Johnston 2005, 1040).

Fourth and finally, given the contingency, contextual embeddedness, equifinality, and non-additivity of action within complex adaptive systems, determining "discrete causality" is often impossible, confounding efforts at precise long-term prediction (Hoffmann and Riley 2002, 316; Jervis 1998, 91). In many cases one simply cannot say who or what *caused* a traffic jam or contributed to its worsening; rather, it was the result of a confluence of entangled actors' decisions and reactions that defy linear analysis. This intertwining

makes it particularly difficult to adapt nomothetic generalizations from past systems to new ones. Just because a three-car pileup caused a specific delay on a certain road one day, it doesn't mean that the same delay will occur the next time the same event occurs.

Although scholars of a variety of philosophical orientations agree about the challenges complex adaptive systems pose and their potential *ubiquity* in the social sciences, few political scientists have fully addressed their contours and attempted to build explanatory (let alone *predictive*) models based on them (see Orsini et al. 2019). This reticence reflects the epistemological humility attendant on recognizing the complexity of social systems, which is yet another type of long-term unpredictability that can be attended to across philosophical divides. "Complex unpredictability" designates cases where there is intersubjective agreement that parameters are changing over time and, therefore, that linear predictive modeling is of limited long-term use.

While it is foreign to traditional social-science models, this articulation of complexity is compatible with various philosophies of science. Neopositivists, for example, cannot deny the non-systematic data resulting from complex adaptive systems, nor can they defend their closed linear predictive models as adequate over the long term in the face of openness and adaptation. Indeed, complexity has encouraged the acknowledgment of fundamental unpredictability even in purely natural sciences, such as genetics, that do not face the added complications of human agency and social exchange (Mitchell 2011). On the other hand, critical realists, whose philosophical ontology depends upon notions of emergence, contingency, and nonlinear causation, should prove especially receptive to the insights of complexity theory (Gerrits and Verweij 2013). Indeed, as John Mingers (2011) has demonstrated, the ideas of Roy Bhaskar, the leading theorist of critical realism, overlap substantially with those of complexity theory. Finally, social constructivists are especially prone to appreciating the resonance of complexity theory with the dense social connections and indeterminacy emphasized by poststructuralism and postmodernism. In this vein, Paul Cilliers (1998 and 2005) has offered substantial contributions demonstrating the resonance of complexity theory with leading postmodernist theorists such as Derrida and Lyotard.

VI. Risk, Uncertainty, and Complexity in Foreign Policymaking

The utility of the three-buckets approach can be demonstrated by returning to Trump's unpredictability doctrine and its interpretation by scholars and political commentators.

We can begin by recognizing that presidential "doctrines" are not simply accounts of a president's or administration's actions, but discursive products intertwined with interpretations that *respond* to these actions and statements.

Interpretations of Trump's unpredictability doctrine tended to employ implicitly deterministic models, whether their causal linkages were social or material, Humean or mechanistic, and regardless of how long the time frame under consideration or how many relevant factors might change. This is unsurprising given the linear cause-and-effect thinking that dominates both academic literature and the popular imagination. For that very reason, relying too heavily on deterministic models would limit our understanding of

unpredictability as a Trumpian foreign policy doctrine guiding decision-making throughout the course of his presidency, even in the face of a vast array of changing global circumstances. Commentary sympathetic to Trump's goals tended to describe the doctrine as the strategic imposition of a calculable risk on adversaries—a tactic used to intimidate and coerce them. Critics, on the other hand, were more likely to describe it as the imposition of chaotic uncertainty. Both interpretations understated their limitations as parameters changed over time or adapted to changing global contexts.

Complexity provides a broader lens for integrating analysis of Trump's personal erraticism, reactions to it and subsequent adaptations over longer timeframes. Throughout 2015 and 2016, then-candidate Trump maintained an intense interview schedule that exposed him to pointed interview questions that he was unprepared to handle, knowing little about either foreign or domestic policy. As early as the summer of 2015, however, political reporters began using the ostensibly neutral and journalistic terminology of unpredictability to describe Trump's personally bombastic and erratic style and behavior, rather than speculating about the less-predictable consequences of his ignorance (e.g., Haberman and Barbaro 2015). Trump, in turn, appropriated this ambiguous language, transforming unpredictability from a veiled negative into a strategic positive. This burnished his reputation as a negotiator while allowing him to dodge questions and further expose his ignorance; instead he could wave off specificity on the grounds that he wanted to maintain room to maneuver (Gitlin 2016; Saletan 2016).

Early on, then, Trump began to invoke unpredictability in response to questions well beyond foreign policy. In an October 2015 interview, for example, discussing whether he would raise the debt limit, he said, "I don't want to say—I want to be unpredictable, because, you know, we need unpredictability. Everything is so predictable with our country" (Wallace 2015). He gave similar responses to questions about whether he would employ nuclear weapons (Dickerson 2016), whether he would shut down the government to defund Planned Parenthood (Wallace 2015), how he would confront China in the South China Sea (Post Opinions Staff 2016; Fisher 2015), how he would deal with instability in Pakistan (Hewitt 2015), and even whether he carried a weapon to the office (CNBC News Releases 2015).

When pressured to elaborate on his advocacy of unpredictability in March 2016, Trump frequently leaned on the example of President Obama alerting the world about U.S. troop movements, saying that these statements "put targets on their back" (Post Opinions Staff 2016; see also Heilemann and Halperin 2016; Haberman and Sanger 2016). Still, he did not elaborate on the differences between secrecy and unpredictability or on the larger place of unpredictability in U.S. grand strategy. Only in April 2016, months after Trump began touting the virtues of unpredictability, did he formally articulate its virtues into a more abstract foreign policy doctrine in the speech with which I began. Shortly thereafter, the idea of strategic unpredictability faded from Trump's public statements and it did not appear again in presidential speeches, news conferences, or other documents after Trump took office (see Woolley and Peters 2019). To this day, it remains unclear whether his campaign-trail articulation of the unpredictability doctrine was incorporated into administration policymaking or whether it simply remained a prominent and convenient defense for Trump's ignorance and inconsistency.

Nevertheless, academic and media commentators came to de-

scribe it as a cohesive doctrine, creating the pretense of either a coherent foreign policy or a “predictably unpredictable” status quo (Hohmann 2019). As expected, responses split largely along partisan lines. Republican and other right-leaning commentators tended to interpret Trump’s invocation of unpredictability as the intellectual descendant of Machiavelli’s *Prince* or Nixon’s Madman doctrine—a form of strategic risk-taking unrelated to personal capriciousness. Commentators such as Charles Krauthammer (2017), Barton Swaim (2016), Victor Davis Hanson (2018), and Ben Shapiro (2017) defended Trump’s flip-flops, mood swings, erratic insults, and disproportionate threats as strategically imposing high variance and as capitalizing on the president’s risk tolerance relative to that of his adversaries. Krauthammer, for example, touted unpredictability by noting how Trump played off the alleged reasonableness of certain former cabinet members (Mike Pence, James Mattis, John Kelly, and Rex Tillerson foremost among them) in a game of good cop/bad cop to deliberately pressure Germany into committing more troops to NATO. Shapiro, likewise, described Trump’s inconsistencies as a form of deliberate trolling. According to this line of thinking, Trump strategically varied his behavior knowing that, if opponents challenged him, he would have a suitable response that would both please his base and help him evade negative consequences. These interpretations share the assumption that Trump’s unpredictability was a *deliberate* effect of calculated decision-making that would consistently have the same effects even as the parameters of policymaking shifted. According to this paradigm, Trump tactically varied inputs to heighten the variance of possible outcomes, exploiting adversaries’ aversion to risk. No matter how Trump’s opponents responded, their behavior came from a probability distribution known to him, to which he was able to respond intelligently.

More critical commentators (including left- and Democratic-leaning observers) tended to describe Trump as personally volatile, leading to genuine uncertainty. Dani Nedal and Daniel Nexon (2017) argued that, unlike Nixon in his “madman” days, Trump’s ingrained, non-deliberate personal erraticism, when translated into foreign policy, became “a recipe for instability, confusion, and self-inflicted harm to U.S. interests abroad.” William Saletan (2016), alternatively, argued that Trump’s invocations of unpredictability, by masking his personal ignorance, magnified the dangers of uninformed policy making, which would lead to cascades of uncertainty as Trump refused to disclose his thinking and allies “freak[ed] out” in response. Keren Yarhi-Milo (2018, 69), drawing on linear models from political science and economics, wrote that Trump’s personal unpredictability increased the “risks of deadly miscalculation” that may force the United States “to take more costly and extreme actions.” Alternatively, Miklos Haraszti (2016) compared Trump’s “purposeful randomness” with that of Hungarian Premier Victor Orban, concluding that such erraticism is designed deliberately to polarize and provoke conflict. These critics and many others (e.g., Fuchs 2017; Patrick 2017; Sullivan and Tumulty 2017) tended to couple Trump’s personal unpredictability, which defied known probability distributions, with relatively deterministic outcomes over significant time frames, even as relevant actors and contextual factors shifted. While some believed that uncertainty about Trump’s behavior would lead to specific heightened risks, others thought it would, in the aggregate, harm U.S. interests, create unpredictable responses, or provoke conflict. Nonetheless, all adopted implicitly deterministic models in which the input of Trump’s unpredictable

behavior would lead to some direct output—with little attention to feedback, adaptation, and other features of complexity.

Such analyses of Trumpian unpredictability are understandable given the typical limitations of journalistic and policy-analysis writing, in which authors have limited space to tease out multiple potential long-term interacting systems, contingencies, and adaptations. Further, authors may deliberately isolate limited interactive dynamics over delineated timescales, crafting constrained, closed models to break off pieces of an otherwise unreasonably vast subject matter. Yet too often, the underlying assumptions go unstated, creating a false sense of certainty regarding the ability of journalists and policy analysts to predict across longer time frames and shifting parameters. Drawing from the complexity bucket can allow scholarly writers to provide deeper insights into the translation of Trump’s “unpredictable” behavior into foreign policy doctrine, but can also frame discussions of the time scales over which the linear models that prevail in much social-science inquiry might break down.

Thus, the complexity bucket is best suited to describing how predictions about the interaction of Trump’s personal unpredictability and other actors’ responses would shift over longer time periods and in relation to changing circumstances. Whereas deterministic analysis would prove insightful in those circumstances where parameters can be held constant, complexity-informed analysis emphasizes that even consistently erratic inputs from Trump could lead to differing results over time as domestic supporters and opponents, as well as foreign allies and adversaries, adapted to his behavior. Parag Khanna (2016) offered some initial thoughts about what this might look like. In a wide-ranging essay on complexity in geopolitics, he advocated a shift in geopolitical thinking from “antiquated, Newtonian logic” to the complexity-based paradigm of quantum mechanics. This approach emphasizes that “the nature of change changes” over time due to the adaptation of different actors and systems, including both the systems involved in foreign-policy implementation and the international system itself. Thus, longer-term prediction is increasingly speculative and can sometimes better be foregone in favor of context-dependent hunts for patterns and insights into changing relationships. For example, Khanna outlined how a Russian drought combined with American commodity-market speculation led to a spike in food prices in Egypt and Syria that helped fuel the Arab Spring protests—a contingent causal chain unlikely to be replicated precisely in the future due to changing parameters. Though Khanna did not spell out a more complete theoretical framework, complexity-based analysis would necessarily avoid speculative nomothetic generalizations about foreign-policy inputs and outputs, recognizing that an open system in which actors are liable to adjust requires either constrained models or more context-based analysis that accepts changing parameters.

Although it does not employ the language of complexity, a 2019 article by the Brookings Institution’s Thomas Wright (2019) features an approach that dovetails with complexity theory. According to Wright, Trump’s unpredictability never stemmed from erratic shifts in his foreign-policy: though simplistic and vague, many of Trump’s core beliefs had been consistent since the 1980s. Instead, Wright argues, Trump’s unpredictability stemmed from tensions between the president and the more professionalized pre-Trump national security establishment of the Republican Party and the U.S. government. Over time, as Trump consolidated

power in his party, he was able to replace establishment players who had been able to check his worst impulses, reducing the administration's foreign policy unpredictability. Instead of leaning on problematic generalizations about the effects of parsimonious linear relationships between the United States and other states to generate predictions, Wright offers a historical narrative of Trump administration foreign policy that is keenly attuned to contextual shifts and adaptations.

The crafting of such historical narratives provides a means of coping with complexity, which places limits on prediction over larger time scales; instead of engaging in such prediction, historical narrative can focus on in-depth analysis of the relationships that take hold over time in a particular, historically contingent evolving system. For example, although no analyst of Trump's unpredictability doctrine during the 2016 campaign season could have possibly foreseen his later expressed desire to purchase the Danish territory of Greenland (Salama et al. 2019), retrospectively equipped with this knowledge and supplementary contextual information, his desire to cancel a state visit to Copenhagen in response to the offer being mocked is perfectly understandable (BBC News 2019).

The addition of the complexity bucket serves to promote prospective epistemological humility as well. Joe Biden won the presidency in 2020 by promising to replace Trump's erraticism with personal consistency and return the United States to normalcy (Jaffe and Wootson Jr. 2019). In the first year of his administration, his most notable foreign policy decision—withdrawing U.S. troops from Afghanistan—represented his commitment to upholding U.S. promises, although Biden seems to have been predisposed to withdraw and did so with such alacrity that unintended consequences ensued. But scholars interested in the long-term impact of the Biden administration's consistency would be naïve to think that simply by shifting from erratic behavior to measured, predictable behavior will necessarily return the United States to a pre-Trump world order. Indeed, systems and norms of U.S. foreign policy-making might have so adapted under Trump that Biden will not increase the predictability of the U.S. role in the international arena, no mat-

ter how predictable his administration may try to be. Likewise, other international actors may have adapted to account for Trump in ways that confound Biden's attempts to ensure consistency. For this reason, even if a post-Trumpian world is not colored by the erratic behavior of the U.S. president, it may remain unpredictable on larger scales and longer time-frames due to complexity.

The complexity bucket entails continually grappling with contextual constraints on our analyses. In most political analysis, deterministic models and mindsets will necessarily have limitations. Recognition of complexity thus tempers unreasonably grandiose conclusions, adding nuance.

Conclusion

This paper has shown how a unifying, descriptive typology of unpredictability, based on intersubjective agreement about the determinism of a given system and the probability distributions of its outputs, can bridge the philosophical divides that otherwise interfere with a full view of the many forms of uncertainty plaguing international (and, more generally, political) behavior. While deterministic models of risk and uncertainty can be useful in social scenarios where parameters can reasonably be held constant, complexity best describes the unpredictability that occurs over larger, more dynamic scales, as adaptations occur.

Unpredictability looms over social science analysis, especially as social scientists attempt to reconcile agent and structure, regularity and dynamism, the ideational and the material. Although scholars may reasonably continue to advocate their chosen philosophical positions based on leaps of faith or a desire to push forward empirical agendas, by analyzing the positions they take in terms of risk, uncertainty, and complexity, we can facilitate dialogue across schools that have made different philosophical wagers. Since no scholars possess pure, unvarnished insight into the nature of the social world, the epistemological humility attempted in the three-bucket approach might help us achieve a fuller understanding of the unpredictability that so often frustrates social science. ■

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Lies, Bullshit, False Beliefs, Ignorance, Skepticism: Some Epistemic Fallout of Our Political Times

Judith Lichtenberg

Facts and events are infinitely more fragile things than axioms, discoveries, theories.

—Arendt 2006, 227

There is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and more necessary to human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men.

—Hume 1748

The reason of man, like man himself, is timid and cautious when left alone, and acquires firmness and confidence in proportion to the number with which it is associated.

—Federalist 49

If you hear a lie once, you don't believe it. But if you hear it from 10,000 people you start questioning what you know.

—Representative of trolling services firm associated with the Duterte administration in the Philippines (Mahtani and Cabato 2019)

American society is increasingly riven by individuals and groups with incompatible beliefs and belief systems. Few readers will require examples, but here are two. The majority of Americans believe that the 2020 presidential election was legitimate, but a significant percentage thinks it was stolen. Most people believe that vaccines protect against dangerous diseases, but a goodly number think them riskier than the diseases they prevent. Those adhering to one set of beliefs distrust or disparage proponents of the other set, blaming them for their gullibility and their failure to attend to sources they themselves find credible.

So how can we be good knowers, or at least reasonable believers? And how can we judge others along these dimensions? These are not only epistemological but ethical concerns.

The central problem for many purposes, including mine here, is that most of what we know or believe about the world we believe second- (or third- or fourth- or *n*th-) hand, based on the testimony of others. Certainly when it comes to the events of the wider world—those beyond each person's immediate perceptions, memories, and powers of reasoning (none of which are exactly infallible either)—almost everything we believe derives from the testimony of other people, many of whose beliefs and claims in turn depend on the testimony of still others, and so on. We might roughly term this collection of beliefs social or even political.

Epistemology plays a role in sorting out these disagreements. Traditionally described as the theory of knowledge, it seeks to understand cognitive success and failure (Steup and Neta 2020), which includes distinguishing reliable from unreliable testimony. Epistemology, then, is an inherently normative discipline, not merely a sociological description of some community's cognitive practices. The rise of social and virtue epistemology over the last few decades has only made this more clear. As Michael Williams (2001, 10–12) argues, epistemic problems “are not just about what we *do* believe but what (in some sense) we *must, ought, or are entitled*

to believe; not just with how we in fact conduct our inquiries but how we *should or may* conduct them.”¹

From the philosophical adage that “ought implies can,” it follows that we have some control over what we believe. But this is controversial. The commonsense view is probably that we cannot directly control our beliefs: we can't simply make ourselves believe something. Even William James (1896), who famously asserted “the will to believe,” limited the realm of this will to that which “cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds.”² That excludes empirical questions such as whether someone stole an election or whether a vaccine is safe and effective. But even if we cannot control our beliefs directly, we can affect them indirectly. We decide which evidence to gather, which media to consume, which people to trust—and these choices themselves play a crucial role in producing our beliefs (Coady 2012, 12–17). For these reasons we bear some responsibility for them.

Or do we? Some deny even this. Hard determinists, a group that includes some social scientists, deny that a person's behavior reflects genuine choices. They deny not only that people can control their beliefs but also that they can control their actions. To others, the nihilistic consequences of this view render it self-refuting.

It's probably fair to say that today most philosophers embrace compatibilism (“soft determinism”), which says that although all actions are determined—the result of causal processes—nevertheless we can be held responsible for some of them. Explaining this seeming paradox is beyond the scope of this paper. (The literature on this topic is voluminous; for a lucid discussion see Sider 2005.) But it aims to do justice to the commonsense belief that sometimes we make real choices and that we cannot live in the world without believing that we and others do. As Kant argued, “rational beings” must presuppose that they and all other rational beings possess freedom of the will (Kant [1785] 1996, 4:448). Compatibilism makes it possible to hold people at least partly morally

1 The ancient Greeks always understood the connection. For discussion see, e.g., Williams 2001, 7–10.

2 “Our passionate nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, ‘Do not decide, but leave the question open,’ is itself a passionate decision,—just like deciding yes or no,—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.”

responsible for their beliefs as well as their actions, while at the same time recognizing the truth of determinism: that the universe is governed by causal laws.

Do those who doubt that our beliefs are within our control deny that choice plays a role in any human behavior? If so, they will hold people responsible neither for their beliefs nor their actions, in which case epistemology, understood as a normative discipline concerned with the conditions under which our beliefs are warranted, would be beside the point. If, on the other hand, their doubts concern only control over beliefs, it is incumbent on them to show that our beliefs are entirely beyond our control.

I shall assume that we exert control over our beliefs indirectly, via choices we make about whom to trust, what sources to consult, whether and how to gather evidence. For those reasons it is legitimate to hold people partly responsible for their beliefs.³

Testimony

So most of what we know about the world beyond our immediate experience relies on the testimony of many others. Recent examples of fundamental disputes about “testimonial facts”—with critical practical and moral consequences—abound. Support for starting the Iraq war in 2003 depended decisively, for many people, on the assertion that Saddam Hussein was working with Al-Qaeda: if they had not believed this claim they would not have supported the war. The claim is a simple factual one: Saddam either was or was not working with Al-Qaeda.⁴ Other testimonial factual claims with important political consequences bear on the extent to which climate change is taking place and the degree to which humans are largely responsible for it. Was Barack Obama born outside the United States? Did Hillary Clinton and her cronies run a child-sex trafficking ring in the basement of a Washington, DC pizza parlor?⁵ Do vaccines cause autism? And—yes—is the world flat?⁶

The reasons we depend so much on testimony to support our beliefs are mostly pretty obvious. Almost all our everyday beliefs—including, e.g., beliefs about what our name is, our birthday, what year it is, which hemisphere we live in, etc.—are learned from other people. As for scientific claims, few of us possess the requisite abilities, skills, and education to evaluate them; almost no one is intellectually equipped to do so for more than a few subjects. It would simply take more time and expertise than most people have to wade through the evidence in order to come to reasonable conclusions; these are full-time jobs at least. So instead we rely on others. For this division of labor to work, however, we need to be able

to make reliable judgments about who or what are trustworthy sources of information.⁷ We implicitly and explicitly make these judgments all the time. Even in making them, we rely on testimony; it’s testimony (almost) all the way down.

Realization of our dependence on testimony and the need to evaluate it can lead in several directions: to reliance on “alternative” sources, skepticism about the possibility of attaining true knowledge, or doubt that there are such things as facts and truth. Often these directions are confused. To address this confusion, I describe some of the twentieth-century philosophical roots of contemporary skepticism about the existence of truth, the impossibility of attaining it, and the untrustworthiness of mainstream media. In the same era, journalism adopted the values of objectivity and neutrality (which are often conflated) in striking ways that bear on this skepticism. I then explore how the current political and media environments differ from those of previous times, when most people were also in the grip of important falsehoods. I go on to examine how purveyors of information, the media through which they communicate, and the recipients of information each contribute to the existence and spread of lies, bullshit, false beliefs, ignorance, and unwarranted skepticism—different ways of going cognitively astray. I conclude with some suggestions about how consumers of information, social media companies, and the mainstream media might improve the epistemic climate.

Some Postmodern Influences

Skepticism about the reliability of the mainstream media as sources of information is not new. In the 1980s this skepticism was in full flower, spurred at least in part by the then-prominence of postmodernism and some strains of the sociology of knowledge, out of which arose the term “the social construction of reality.”⁸ Adherence to these ideas took a variety of forms, but they generally pushed back against truth, reality, and objectivity as checks on how we interpret our experience of the world. Although sharp criticism of the mass media does not require adopting the postmodern stance (Noam Chomsky is a case in point), postmodernism and the sociology of knowledge were powerful influences—not so much on journalists themselves as on those who studied them and their products. For example, the prominent communications theorist James Carey asserted in 1989 that reality is “a vast production, a staged creation—something humanly produced and humanly maintained” (Carey 1989, 26). Already in 1972, in a much-cited article sociologist Gaye Tuchman had described objectivity as “strategic ritual” (Tuchman 1972).

3 Doxastic voluntarism—the idea that we can control our beliefs—has been the subject of debate for centuries, dating at least as far back as Hume (Coady 2012, 12). To the extent that the term fails to distinguish direct from indirect control, the dispute may be a red herring. For a good discussion of epistemic responsibility see Cassam 2019, especially chapter 6.

4 Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis 2003 shows that a large majority who supported the 2003 Iraq war believed that Saddam was working with Al-Qaeda and/or possessed WMD. “The presence of misperceptions was the most powerful factor predicting support for the war” (ibid., 597). Questions about the presence of WMD were equally important, but in this case more than one fact was at stake. Central was not only whether Saddam had WMD but whether he planned to use them and had delivery systems for them. As Coady argues, most of the debates about the legitimacy of the Iraq war focused on epistemic issues (Coady 2012, 3).

5 For detailed accounts see Singer and Brooking 2018, 127–37, and Rossi 2020.

6 The last has, according to Singer and Brooking (2018, 123), made a “dramatic comeback” thanks to the Internet.

7 In some languages, such as Wanano, spoken in the Brazilian northwest part of the Amazon, speakers indicate how the information they are conveying was obtained through “terminal morphemes” known as “evidentials.” “A speaker must indicate how she received her information by applying an evidentiary affix to every verb” (Chernela 2011, 201). This conveys how the speaker knows what she is saying (or thinks she knows), helping the listener to “evaluate the reliability of the statement” (205).

8 This term was coined by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their book *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Berger and Luckmann 1967).

These critiques were not limited to journalism; they were much broader, applying to all sources of alleged knowledge. In 1998 the postmodernist historian Peter Novick described an earlier consensus among his peers—then disintegrating—that the aim of history was “to discover and record the objective truth about the past,” with the ultimate goal of painting “a true and complete picture” of it (Novick 1998, 29).⁹ Novick himself welcomed the breakdown of this view. Describing the newer outlook, he asserted that its proponents (of whom he was unmistakably one) believed that the words “true” and “truthful” applied only to “rather narrowly defined ‘brute-factual’ statements,” and that it made “no sense to say of two accounts, assuming neither was filled with egregious misstatements of fact, that one was truer than the other” (ibid., 37). On its face, Novick’s acknowledgment that brute facts exist might seem to have reflected a moderate position not threatening to the concept of truth. Yet Novick asserted that history and fiction are barely distinguishable: he found little reason to separate them except “to save librarians a massive job of recataloguing” (ibid., 40). Ideally, he asserted, historians “would make no greater (but also no lesser) truth claims than poets or painters” (ibid., 39).

How did Novick reconcile his acknowledgment of brute facts—such as that “The cat is on the mat” and “On 7 December 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor”—with his view that historians’ enterprise is akin to poetry or fiction? He did it by pointing to two features of being accurate about such facts. First, being accurate is “not hard to do”; and second, “it’s not at all inconvenient: with minimal ingenuity you can construct a narrative of almost any imaginable shape, drawing whatever moral you wish, without getting facts wrong” (ibid., 39). So factual accuracy, he thought, is “inconsequential.” Still, he conceded, it’s generally wise to be accurate if only to avoid embarrassment or loss of credibility (ibid., 40).

Both of Novick’s claims are wildly implausible. Some facts are easy to discover, and others are not. The idea that virtually any facts are compatible with any narrative explaining them flies in the face of the pervasive human desire to know the facts, to “get to the bottom of things”—which presupposes that facts are anything but inconsequential for how we should proceed to act and live our lives.

I am hardly the first to blame postmodernism for some of our current troubles with facts and truth. Occasionally postmodernists do it themselves. In 2004, Bruno Latour, described in a 2018 *New York Times Magazine* article as “the post-truth philosopher,” agonized over the possible role his work might have played in our current crisis of skepticism about truth (Kofman 2018).¹⁰ One writer describes Latour’s 1979 book (with Steve Woolgar) *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* as “inaugurating the Science Wars, a pitched battle between scientists and cultural theorists over the objectivity of science” (Salmon 2018). More recently, however, in an article in *Critical Inquiry*, Latour considered the role he may have played in the rise of climate change skeptics, 9/11 deniers, and the like:

While we spent years trying to detect the real prejudices hidden behind the appearance of objective statements, do we now have to reveal the real objective and

incontrovertible facts hidden behind the illusion of prejudices? And yet entire Ph.D. programs are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives. Was I wrong to participate in the invention of this field known as science studies? . . . What has become of critique when my neighbor in the little Bourbonnais village where I live looks down on me as someone hopelessly naïve because I believe that the United States had been attacked by terrorists? (Latour 2004, 227-8)

Latour insinuates that his earlier project was misunderstood all along: “The question was never to get away from facts but closer to them, not fighting empiricism but, on the contrary, renewing empiricism” (ibid., 231). If so, a lot of people were misled.

Arendt on Truth and Politics

Hannah Arendt’s 1967 essay “Truth and Politics” sheds light on these questions. Arendt argues that “even in Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia it was more dangerous to talk about concentration and extermination camps, whose existence was no secret, than to hold and to utter ‘heretical’ views on anti-Semitism, racism, and Communism” (Arendt 1967, 232). That only makes sense on the view that no respectable theories could explain or justify extermination camps. Arendt continues: “Unwelcome opinion can be argued with, rejected, or compromised upon, but unwelcome facts possess an infuriating stubbornness that nothing can move except plain lies” (ibid., 236). It is for this reason that “facts and events are infinitely more fragile things than axioms, discoveries, theories” (ibid., 227).

In support of this point, Arendt quotes Clemenceau, who, when asked about guilt for the outbreak of World War I, replied: “This I don’t know. But I know for certain that they will not say Belgium invaded Germany” (ibid., 234). Clemenceau ironically hints that he does know something about guilt for the war. Facts underdetermine theories. Perhaps they are never dispositive—their contributions to normative or practical conclusions can be outweighed or countered by other facts or arguments—but they are highly relevant and, in many cases, point sharply to a particular conclusion. So it is that, as Arendt asserts, “it may be in the nature of the political realm to be at war with truth in all its forms” (ibid., 235).

Arendt points to two characteristics of facts that seem almost contradictory. First, while “rational” truths (such as the truths of mathematics) and “factual” truths are very different, once agreed upon they are beyond dispute. “Truth carries within itself an element of coercion; as Grotius insisted, ‘even God cannot cause two

⁹ Novick, who died in 2012, was the author of the excellent book *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (1988). See also Lichtenberg 1998. In what follows I assume an analogy between the problems facing reporters and journalists and those facing historians, despite significant differences between them.

¹⁰ Some deny that postmodernism played any causal role in the decline of truth; see, e.g., Hanlon 2018.

times two not to make four” (ibid., 235, 236).¹¹ Yet despite Arendt’s view that facts are indisputable, she also asserts that from a logical point of view, “facts have no conclusive reason whatever for being what they are; they could always have been otherwise” (ibid., 238). The contingency of facts can make them easy to reject. God cannot make two times two equal five, but He could, it seems, change the course of a storm if He chose.¹² Even if climate change is taking place, we do not defy logic by denying that it is.

What’s Different Now?

The term “post-truth era” is unfortunate. Although coined, it seems, by those sympathetic to the concept of truth, the term may suggest that truth isn’t important anymore, that we’ve gotten beyond the naïve preoccupation with it, or even that somehow truth no longer exists.

There’s another reason, too, that “post-truth era” is misleading. It implies that truth was more plentiful in times past. But is that so? Large numbers of people have always believed many falsehoods. They believed that the earth is flat, that the sun revolves around the earth, that human health is governed by black bile, yellow bile, blood, and phlegm. In some cases these false beliefs were the best the science of the day had to offer, in which case it was reasonable for people to hold them. In other instances, not so much.

In any event, a concern with truth grew deep roots in journalism in the twentieth century, when notions like fairness, balance, objectivity, and neutrality—thought to promote truth—became preeminent.¹³ Under this regime, reporters generally did not make even factual claims without attributing them to sources; and, in the interest of fairness, such claims had to be balanced by claims on the other side (there was rarely more than one), whether or not it was credible. Consumers of news might be left to think that both sides were equally legitimate.¹⁴ That kind of thinking seems to be what overcame a Florida high school principal who recently refused to say the Holocaust happened because he thought he had to remain politically neutral (Mervosh 2019). (He lost his job.)

In the United States, the values of journalistic fairness, balance, and objectivity were enshrined in the Fairness Doctrine, established by the Federal Communications Commission in 1949. It required that those granted broadcast licenses cover some issues of public importance, and that they do so fairly. This meant that they were required to air opposing views. The Fairness Doctrine was abolished in 1987 on the grounds that the growing diversity of mass media made it no longer necessary (Ruane 2011; Villase-

nor 2020).¹⁵ Its demise helped propel right-wing talk radio to the forefront, since programs were no longer required to air opposing points of view.

Did this make things any worse today than they were before, epistemologically? One reason we might think not, ironically, is that the number and proportion of people who take truth, evidence, and reason seriously is probably higher than in the past, and they are more vocal than in earlier times. If so, falsehoods might be more often challenged publicly than they used to be, at least in democracies where free speech is protected; and our expectation that truth will win out might also be elevated. Yet even in democratic countries, the extent of bluster, bullying, and lying has recently become especially shameless.

This results at least in part from what most distinguishes our present situation from earlier ones: the rise of the Internet and social media, where the transmission of ideas, facts, and fantasies ramify faster and farther, making it easier than ever to spread falsehoods, whether deliberately or not. “Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President”—a lie originating in Macedonia—was the most popular fake “news” story of the whole 2016 presidential election. “Three times as many Americans read and shared it on their social media accounts as they did the top-performing article from the *New York Times*” (Singer and Brooking 2018, 120, 323).¹⁶ A study by MIT data scientists of 126,000 Twitter “rumor cascades” found that “falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information” (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018).¹⁷ It took true stories about six times as long to reach 1500 people as it did false stories; “falsehoods were 70% more likely to be retweeted than the truth.” The authors found that humans, not bots, were primarily responsible for these results. They speculate that the relative novelty of false rumors explains their greater spread: “When information is novel, it is not only surprising, but also more valuable, both from an information theoretic perspective [in that it provides the greatest aid to decision making] and from a social perspective [in that it conveys social status on one that is in the know]” (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018).

But social media do not bear sole responsibility for these problems. In keeping with the conception of objective journalism noted earlier, the most respected mainstream media outlets in the United States are sensitive to charges that they have a “liberal bias,” and so may engage in “false equivalence,” bending over backwards to make sure they give the “other side” equal time, no matter how outlandish its claims (Fallows 2019). This hypothesis

¹¹ In his 2017 State of the State speech, California Governor Jerry Brown quoted this passage from Grotius as a counter to Donald Trump’s denial of human-caused climate change (Gajanan 2017).

¹² Or could He? Clearly many other scientific and material facts, and the theories that support them, would have to be different too. Consider in this connection Trump’s insistence during Hurricane Dorian in 2019 that Alabama was at risk, which contradicted the National Weather Service’s position and was buttressed by a doctored map. According to a *New York Times* story, the Secretary of Commerce threatened to fire top employees at the agency overseeing the NWS after the agency repudiated the President’s statement (Flavelle, Friedman, and Baker 2019).

¹³ For a history and analysis of the rise of objectivity as an ideal in journalism see Schudson 1978 and Lichtenberg 2000.

¹⁴ James Fallows recently wrote about the problem, which he calls false equivalence (Fallows 2019). Alexander Cockburn already savaged this understanding of objectivity back in 1982 in when he imagined a segment of the MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour in which two talking heads debate the pros and cons of one person owning another (Cockburn 1982).

¹⁵ The Fairness Doctrine never applied to print media; doing so was thought to violate the First Amendment.

¹⁶ Pope Francis’s reaction: “No one has a right to do this. It is a sin and it is hurtful.”

¹⁷ “A rumor cascade begins on Twitter when a user makes an assertion about a topic in a tweet, which could include written text, photos, or links to articles online. Others then propagate the rumor by retweeting it” (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018, 1146). Another study finds that corrections do not always correct misperceptions, and can even increase them (Nyhan and Reifler 2010).

is confirmed by a new study finding that the disinformation campaign to discredit the legitimacy of mail-in voting was driven in part by the mainstream media's commitment to "balance, neutrality, or the avoidance of the appearance of taking a side." The report also cites two other core journalistic practices that produce these outcomes. One is "If the President says it, it's news." The other is headline-seeking ("If it bleeds, it leads"). The authors believe that disinformation effects result from an "elite-driven, mass media process" in which "social media played only a secondary and supportive role" (Benkler et al. 2020).

Misinformation, Disinformation, and Ignorance

To think about the various ways in which false beliefs can come about, we should distinguish purveyors of information, the media through which they purvey it, and recipients of that information, whom I'll call *citizens* to mark their supposed special role in a democratic society. Purveyors can be individuals or collective bodies like clubs, churches, corporations, or governments. Media include conversation, word of mouth, newspapers, magazines, radio, TV, documentaries, Facebook, Twitter, etc. Citizens are individual human beings. Of course purveyors can be citizens and vice versa.

When purveyors convey false information, they can do so intentionally or unintentionally.¹⁸ There are also intermediate states: e.g., recklessness and negligence, which themselves come in degrees. We might distinguish deliberate from unintentional communication of falsehood with the terms *disinformation* and *misinformation* respectively.

C. Thi Nguyen identifies misinformation with *epistemic bubbles* and disinformation with *echo chambers* (Nguyen 2020, 142). An epistemic bubble can emerge "with no ill intent, through ordinary processes of social selection and community formation."¹⁹ It can come about quite naturally. Your friends on Facebook are people you know and share interests and values with, so what comes across your newsfeed will most likely reinforce your point of view and omit alternative perspectives. And, as Regina Rini argues, despite risks, it is not unreasonable to "attribute greater credibility to co-partisan testifiers than to others, given that shared partisan affiliation points to shared normative values" (Rini 2017). In an echo chamber, on the other hand, "other relevant voices have been actively discredited. . . . They work by systematically isolating their members from all outside epistemic sources" (Nguyen 2020, 142).²⁰

Recipients of information will not distinguish between misinformation and disinformation. (It is hard to think how they could do so in real time.) They will simply come to hold a false belief.

Holding false beliefs is different from being ignorant. Ignorance is a common charge lodged against citizens, and is often

thought to undermine their alleged role in democracies. But as Étienne Brown observes, ignorance is mainly a problem when citizens don't know they are ignorant (Brown 2018, 208-209).²¹ If instead they are Socratically ignorant—if they know they don't know—they may be able to perform their roles intelligently nonetheless, and may at least be humble, not claiming more knowledge or expertise than they have. Most people are ignorant of many important matters relevant to good government—the intricacies of climate change, nuclear disarmament, health care policy, to name just a few—and can hardly be faulted for this ignorance. But if they know they don't know they may still be able to identify others who do know—and if not, they may at least keep mum. That may be all we need, or at least can hope for, to avoid falsehood cascades.

It is not, Nguyen believes, that contemporary citizens no longer care about truth and evidence (what he calls the "total irrationality" explanation for the "post-truth era"), but that some of them put their trust in others who deliberately cut them off from competing sources and voices. Those inside echo chambers, then, will be more likely to think they know when they don't. Nguyen believes that inhabitants of epistemic bubbles are at less risk, because they have not affirmatively rejected listening to alternative sources; they just fail to come across them regularly. Still, what those in epistemic bubbles hear makes it easy for them to tune out other points of view on one ground or another, or perhaps on none at all. If so, epistemic bubbles are less different from echo chambers than Nguyen believes, and might be nearly as dangerous.

Why are people prone to false beliefs? Brown helpfully describes some of the important reasons and the psychological literature supporting them. He presents five phenomena discovered by experimentalists, summarized here.

First, "when people know little about a source, they treat information from that source as credible" (Brown 2018, 284, quoting Rapp 2016).²² Second, when people encounter the same information many times, they are more likely to believe it. Psychologists label this the "truth effect" (Brown 2018, 203, citing Dechêne et al. 2010). Third, people are influenced by stories they know are fictional, even when the stories contain "information" that contradicts well-known facts (Brown 2018, 203, citing Marsh and Fazio 2006). Fourth, people don't always recall the source of their information (Brown 2018, 204, citing Marsh, Cantor, and Brashier 2016 and Rapp 2016). Fifth, as we saw earlier, fake news arouses more "surprise and disgust" than true information, causing it to be more widely shared (Brown 2018, 204, citing Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018).

Lies and Bullshit

Another reason that people acquire false beliefs, however, is that some purveyors engage in lies and bullshit. Politicians and others

¹⁸ We should also distinguish between two kinds of purveyors: authors/originators of falsehoods and fake news, and redistributors (re-tweeters, gossips, etc.). It's plausible that the former always act intentionally, while the latter may run the gamut: they may act negligently or recklessly (presumably without knowing the information is false, but culpably ignorant), or intentionally, in full knowledge that it's false.

¹⁹ The labels might be misleading; some use the term "echo chamber" in a broader sense that includes epistemic bubbles. But the distinction is useful in any case, so I'll stick with these labels.

²⁰ Nguyen credits this analysis to Jamieson and Cappella 2008. They liken the process to that used to indoctrinate cult members, teaching them to mistrust outside sources.

²¹ Thus the ubiquitous line attributed (perhaps inaccurately) to Mark Twain: "It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so."

²² For a chilling investigation of the hold over us of social media see Orłowski 2020.

who speak publicly sometimes intentionally deceive their hearers, aiming for them to believe false propositions. It's natural to think that politicians also sometimes bullshit. In *On Bullshit*, Harry Frankfurt asserts that while “the liar is essentially someone who deliberately promulgates a falsehood,” the bullshitter is indifferent about whether her statements are true or false. You can't lie unless you know the truth, he says, but “producing bullshit requires no such conviction.” He concludes that “bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are” (Frankfurt 2005, 46, 55, 61).²³

Bullshitting is common in the private realm. It happens most often when insecure people want to look like they know what they're talking about even if they don't. Bullshitters don't care much about what their hearers believe, and mainly aim to sound smart or interesting. Bullshitting aims to produce in hearers a certain impression of the speaker more than it aims to produce in them false beliefs. In this sense, it's not obvious whether politicians are often bullshitters, because when they speak in the public realm, they are rarely indifferent to what beliefs they create in hearers. It would seem, then, that in public discourse bullshitting plays a lesser role than outright lying, and is therefore less threatening. Donald Trump might seem to be the exception: the paradigm case of the bullshitter. Does he care what his hearers come to believe about the facts, or does he care only about what they think of *him*—that, for example, he sticks to his guns and never backs down?²⁴ Insofar as it is the latter he is a bullshitter. But he also lies frequently.

We care when people lie partly because of what it demonstrates about their characters. Even though we know that everyone lies sometimes²⁵ and that politicians, in particular, probably cannot avoid it if they hope to keep their jobs, these excuses, if that is what they are, must be weighed against the need for trust, which must play a critical role in the relationship between politicians and the people they represent—and among people generally. Of course, whether lying is significant depends on how much of it there is and what its content is. Much of what people lie about is trivial, meant to please others or to prop oneself up. (According to Feldman, Forrest, and Happ 2002, women do more of the first and men more of the second.) But the lies of politicians, public officials, and public figures often concern issues of wider significance.

When we learn that someone has lied about some matter we have reason not to trust other things they say. As Kant might have put it (and as we have lately been reminded), lying undermines the “institution” of communication: when you cease to trust someone because you learn they have lied you may start to doubt almost anything of any significance they say. The effects can be corrosive, contributing to the destructive skepticism I discuss in the next section. Even if Trump was sincere (which is doubtful) when he said that he underplayed the significance of the coronavirus in February 2020 so as not to alarm the American people, that strategy was doomed to backfire as long as the real threat of the disease would eventually emerge. Leaving aside its moral defects, this approach was not smart.

In light of our inevitable reliance on others' testimony to acquire true beliefs and avoid false ones, trust in people's overall ve-

racity is essential. It's also important because of what epistemic untrustworthiness tells us about a person's character across the board. Because having the truth is important for us to make our way in the world, those who would deliberately lead us away from it do not have our interests at heart. We cannot entrust them with our trust.

This statement is in need of qualification, however. Only the acquisition of some truths and the avoidance of some false beliefs are relevant to our making our way in the world, so the class of such beliefs needs to be specified further. Some argue that certain illusions (e.g., about one's own abilities, or the existence of a just God) are useful for having a happy and successful life, and they may be right. Moreover, trust has both a moral and cognitive meaning. Our focus has been on people who are untrustworthy because they intentionally—often maliciously—deceive others. But people can be perfectly well-meaning yet unreliable. Loss of trust in these cases may have similar consequences, but there may be important differences.

Skepticism and Its Consequences

One consequence of false information is false beliefs. Another is skepticism—the withholding of belief. I do not mean skepticism as a or even the central problem of epistemology, but rather the stance originally personified by Socrates and later by John Stuart Mill, which teachers often try to instill in their students: to be critical, slow to judge the veracity of a claim, to question its source, analyze its meaning, be open to changing one's mind, etc. This is what we might call “constructive skepticism,” which results not in believing nothing but in believing carefully. A positive unintended consequence of lying may be to make recipients less credulous.

The danger, however, is that in a culture of lies and other degraded discourse, recipients may move from doubting the truth of a particular account of things to altogether rejecting the concept, that is the possibility, of truth. In *Merchants of Doubt*, Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway describe the strategy employed by corporations in the fossil fuel and tobacco industries (among others) to discredit science: “Doubt is our product,” read an infamous memo written by a tobacco industry executive in 1969, “since it is the best means of competing with the “body of fact” that exists in the minds of the general public” (Oreskes and Conway 2010, 34). The result may be to instill the belief that no one, no alleged facts, can be trusted. The real danger of fake news is that its “very existence creates a world in which almost everything can be dismissed as false” (Wardel 2019).

Here skepticism becomes nihilism. Arendt reaches a similar conclusion, although she posits a world (one it is hoped we do not yet inhabit) in which factual truth has been consistently and totally displaced by lies. “The result . . . is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth be defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world—and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end—is being destroyed” (Arendt 2006, 252-3).

But in fact it is impossible to navigate the world without beliefs

²³ It seems there are a few suppressed premises here that need to be made explicit.

²⁴ His hearers may also be indifferent to truth. Reporter Mark Leibovich (2020) describes the “unshakable allegiance” of Trump's supporters as falling “somewhere between true belief and being in on the joke.”

²⁵ A much-cited study finds that 60 percent of people lied at least once during a ten-minute conversation. See Feldman, Forrest, and Happ 2002.

about what is and is not the case: we never do become genuine skeptics about everything. As Hume argues in describing the destructive power of skepticism that results from philosophical reflection,

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours' amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther. (Hume 1739, I.IV.VII)

But the analogy is imperfect. Like Hume, the contemporary consumer of mass and social media cannot sustain skepticism. But in contested cases it is not “nature” that fills the void. Instead, self-interest, convenience, prejudice, prior beliefs, the loudest voice, the nearest voice, the charismatic leader, and the largest crowd determine the “truths” that many people accept.

Possible Fixes

What can be done to counteract the effects of fake news, false beliefs, and destructive skepticism? There are, I believe, four possible foci of activity: consumers of media; social media companies like Facebook and Twitter; mainstream media organizations; and governments. This is much too large a subject to tackle here, and I will simply mention a few efforts and proposals regarding the first three.

First, consumers of media must improve their skills at detecting untruth. This is advice some people might be able to take on their own, but most need help. Media literacy must be taught seriously in schools and colleges; it's time for “critical thinking” courses to

take center stage in every curriculum, and to devote substantial attention to social and mass media. The News Literacy Project is a nonprofit organization with resources to help people learn to be “smart, active consumers of news and information” (newslit.org). Mike Caulfield at Washington State University Vancouver runs the Digital Polarization Initiative, which develops “web literacy skills in college undergraduates” (Caulfield, n.d.). Facebook publishes “Tips to Spot False News.” A recent study from the National Academy of Sciences confirmed the effectiveness of such tips; it found that “exposure to variants of the Facebook media literacy intervention reduces people's belief in false headlines” (Guess et al. 2020).²⁶

Second, social media companies must take more steps than they have so far to separate truth from falsehood and lies. As Kaveh Waddell notes, their weapons fall into three categories: promoting good information, demoting bad information, and preventing misinformation from appearing at all. Facebook employs independent and certified fact-checkers and moderators who work to identify and review false news; stories identified as false appear lower in users' news feeds (Facebook n.d.; Waddell 2020, March 11). But fact-checkers may be overwhelmed, and it has been argued that “Facebook and its peers simply do not wish to pay for armies of humans to engage in what amounts to a non-revenue-generating cost” (Leetaru 2018). Rini suggests that Facebook calculate a reputation score for users based on how often they share disputed stories. Every proposal has limitations and drawbacks (Rini 2017).²⁷

Finally, mainstream media outlets need to work to avoid problems such as those mentioned earlier: false equivalence, headline seeking, and “If an Important Person says it, it's news.” In the hyper-competitive environment that media organizations inhabit, it's hard to be optimistic about the prospects of success; the most respectable and respected news sources engage in these questionable activities every day. Nonetheless, in 2016 the *New York Times* decided to call some of Trump's assertions lies rather than mere falsehoods, despite the difficulty, implicit in calling something a lie, of knowing what is in a person's mind (National Public Radio 2016; Borchers 2016).

Sometimes it's just not that difficult. ■

²⁶ The study unfortunately uses the term “mainstream news” to mean true news. There are various significant caveats. For a good discussion of the study see Waddell 2020.

²⁷ Rini is well aware of the drawbacks. See also Frost-Arnold 2014. Karen Frost-Arnold believes the costs of abandoning internet anonymity greatly outweigh the benefits, and suggests focusing instead on influencing the mindsets of users. She cites evidence for the conclusion that “making the harms of internet untrustworthiness more salient to users” might reduce their motivation to engage in such activities (77). I am pessimistic about the extent to which this approach could make a significant difference.

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False Beliefs, the Myth of "Post-Truth," and the Need for a Capacious Political Epistemology

Jeffrey Friedman

Judith Lichtenberg's "Lies, Bullshit, False Beliefs, Ignorance, Skepticism" covers several important issues relevant to both political epistemology and the epistemic crisis unfolding around the world. So I welcome the opportunity to respond to her paper, in my capacity as a political epistemologist (not as the editor of *Political Epistemology*).

My response will attempt to answer the following three questions, which I've chosen to address so as to outline some of the research opportunities and challenges facing political epistemologists if they attend to *systematic and involuntary* sources of false belief—not just the individual and voluntary sources of it, such as lying, to which Lichtenberg draws our attention.

Here, then, are my three questions:

First, what is the relationship between moral philosophy and political

epistemology?

I will argue that the relationship is, or should be, minimal. Moral philosophy entails blameworthiness, but many of the epistemic problems of politics and government are involuntary and thus are not blameworthy. They are *unintended* consequences of Lichtenberg's starting point: that we are epistemically dependent on others for most of the information on which we base our political opinions.

Epistemic dependence entails that our opinions are hostage not only to our informants' deliberate and thus (perhaps) blameworthy lying, bullshitting, gaslighting, and so on, but also their involuntary, inadvertent mistakes. I will suggest that because all of our informants, being human, may inadvertently err, political epistemologists would needlessly narrow our inquiries into false

beliefs if we confined our attention to false beliefs that stem from blameworthy actions such as lies. This moralized focus would overlook such causes of false belief as our informants'—and our own—accidental ignorance of evidence, mistaken interpretations of evidence, and unwitting entrapment in epistemic bubbles and echo chambers. These are problems that cannot necessarily be blamed on anyone's deliberate actions, and thus may not be susceptible to ethical philosophizing and moral condemnation.

Second, what is the nature of the current epistemic crisis?

Contra Lichtenberg, I will suggest that it may not primarily be a crisis of lies and disinformation, nor a “post-truth” abandonment of objectivity, science, or concern for facts. Instead, it may reflect the pervasive and involuntary disagreement we would expect when politics is conducted by fallible human beings. Such disagreement spirals into polarization, contempt, and mutual hatred when the divergent parties blame each other for not seeing things their way—as if their political opponents were intentionally, not inadvertently, misrepresenting reality. Collective deliberation turns into its opposite, then, when political actors take the moralistic approach to epistemic questions—condemning each other for deliberately denying or ignoring facts, or for deliberately misleading others about facts, or for culpably “choosing” to rely on untrustworthy sources of information. Thus, not only is the moralistic approach incapable of producing an empirical understanding of non-blameworthy epistemic problems; this very approach, when adopted by political actors, is responsible in part, or so I will suggest, for the increasingly violent epistemic warfare that we now face.

Third, can political epistemology tell us anything normative if it does not take the moralistic path that Lichtenberg's essay represents?

I will maintain that normative political epistemologists can indeed transcend the moral theorist's preoccupation with blameworthy actions, but that this will require us to strictly dichotomize our own first-order beliefs about political issues from our second-order findings and contentions about the epistemic processes that promote either true or false first-order beliefs among political actors. Dichotomization enables us to approach the beliefs of other actors with intellectual charity, which is impossible if we indulge the moralist's habit of blaming others for holding false beliefs—i.e., beliefs that the moralist thinks are false, based on the moralist's opinions about the first-order truth.

If *empirical* political epistemologists pursue intellectual charity, they may be able to understand, rather than condemn, the political actors with whom they disagree. *Normative* political epistemologists, similarly, rather than seeking out nefarious actors to blame for spewing disinformation (lies) or misinformation (untruths), can teach political actors tolerance of their political opponents, whose (putatively) false beliefs may be explained by non-blameworthy factors such as those identified by systematic analyses of the sources of involuntary mistake. Normative political epistemologists can also foster an attitude of humility about their own political beliefs, which may be shaped by the same systematic processes that, empirically, generate false beliefs among other political actors. And normative political epistemologists can caution empirical political epistemologists to separate their political beliefs from their research by bracketing their first-order convictions about

which politically disputed truth claims are valid and which of them constitute misinformation or disinformation.

Thus, I will suggest that political epistemologists should restrict themselves to researching second-order, systematic causes of belief and belief distortion without judging any particular first-order truth claim as true or false. In this way, they can attempt to understand the full range of political actors' beliefs sympathetically—especially the beliefs with which they disagree (i.e., those they consider to be misinformed, disinformed, or underinformed). In contrast, the moralistic approach not only narrows the range of false beliefs down to those that are purportedly blameworthy; it renders sympathy for (rather than condemnation of) those with whom one disagrees impossible, turning political epistemology into a continuation of political conflict in scientific or philosophic guise.

Empirical Sources of Inadvertently False Beliefs

I could not agree more with Lichtenberg's starting point: that we unavoidably rely, for most of our (putative) political knowledge, on the testimony of others. Virtually none of our political opinions are based on direct experience alone. If we are to know whatever we need to know in order to make sound political decisions, we will almost always have to get most of this knowledge from other people.

Let me begin, then, by providing an incomplete list of reasons for our epistemic dependence on others, and for the fact that this dependence produces not only abundant opportunities for our informants to engage in what virtue epistemologists call “epistemically vicious” practices such as lying, but abundant opportunities for the *inadvertent* and thus morally uncriticizable formation of false beliefs.¹

1. The first factor is the *opacity* of societal cause and effect, or the *invisibility* (the metaphor is unimportant) of the forces that cause widespread and long-term social and economic problems, and of the society-wide effects of collective actions to solve these problems.

Because we cannot directly observe society-wide causation, it always has to be communicated to us. Indeed, absent communication, not only would the causes of social problems and the effects of collective action to solve them remain invisible, but so would the problems themselves, at least at the level of resolution that we need. We cannot treat social problems as intense and widespread enough to warrant collective action without evidence of just how intense and widespread they are—evidence that transcends anyone's personal experience. Nor can we infer the causes of these problems or the effects of proposed solutions from personal experience alone. Therefore, we need to rely, to some significant extent, on data gatherers and theoreticians. But as any competent social scientist will recognize, it is not easy for non-omniscient, fallible beings to gather reliable data and theorize it adequately. It is not impossible to do this, but the opacity of what is being quantified and theorized ensures that the resulting data and theories are never *self-evidently* true (Friedman 2019b, ch. 1).

1 The four sources of fallibility listed here are more general than those that, I contend in *Power Without Knowledge* (Friedman 2019b, chs. 2–6), undermine *technocratic* knowledge claims. The sources of specifically technocratic fallibility imply a particular political anthropology (Friedman 2020) that one need not accept in order to grapple with the more general problem of fallibility dealt with in the present essay.

The clearest evidence for this conclusion is that disagreement about facts, and about their best interpretation, is rife even among expert data gatherers and theoreticians. When two parties disagree about the truth, at least one of the parties must be (inadvertently) mistaken, so the truth at issue cannot be self-evident; self-evident truths would produce unanimity. Yet this does not mean that we should fetishize expert or scholarly consensus as an indication that truth has been discovered. The same epistemic difficulties that facilitate the mistakes that must be occurring when there is dissensus can also facilitate mistakes when there is consensus. Even a consensus of natural scientists, social scientists, or social theorists is an ideational overlap among fallible human beings to whom opaque truths cannot, as such, be self-evident; this explains why, on occasion, there are scientific revolutions among natural scientists, and why in social science and social theory there are so many fads. In such cases we witness diachronic disagreement among consensus views, which demonstrates that no synchronic consensus should be assumed to be the living presence of Truth.

While these considerations, which bear on the difficulty of knowing the truth, do not entail that we should be radical skeptics who reject all claims to knowledge, they do caution against attaching *certainty* to whatever provisional conclusions data gatherers and theoreticians reach, regardless of whether these conclusions are consensually shared.

2. A second problem is that *it is impossible to read others' minds*. Therefore, intentions, as well as other ideas in agents' minds, must be imputed indirectly from the evidence provided by agents' statements and other actions. Such imputation requires intellectual charity, i.e., a good-faith effort to understand the reasons for the agents' statements and actions from the agents' point of view—not our own point of view.² But intellectual charity is difficult, as it requires bridging the ideational gap between one mind and another.

Each mind can be seen as a vast array of ideas woven into a web (Quine and Ullian 1978). This web produces interpretations of situations (defined very broadly), and these interpretations issue in beliefs about what is true of a situation. But when others' beliefs (and thus their intentions) are part of the situation we seek to understand, we face the fact that no two webs of belief are identical, which would be a necessary prerequisite of interpersonal transparency. Even knowing our own minds is difficult; knowing the mind of another is nearly as hard to accomplish as understanding the workings of invisible social causation. The challenge of belief heterogeneity is particularly forbidding when we cannot engage in ongoing personal dialogue with the others whose ideas, including intentions, we aim to understand. Yet in large polities, ongoing personal dialogue is rare. In such polities, then, it is no more the case that political motives are self-evident than that the causes of social problems and the effects of political actions are self-evident.

3. We also confront more mundane epistemic difficulties, such as our spatial remove from political actors' bodies, as opposed to the gap between our minds and theirs. The consequent inaccessibility of political actors' physical actions, such as their words and deeds, to our direct observation entails that these must almost

always be mediated to us by on-the-scene observers such as journalists. However, a much-neglected difficulty confronted by journalists (as well as ordinary citizens and social scientists), even when dealing with mundane facts such as words and deeds, is that there are far too many facts—there is far too much “information”—for any human observer to take in, understand, and communicate to the rest of us. The world of politics, like the world in general, would appear to us as William James suggested the world must appear to a newborn—as a “blooming, buzzing confusion”—if overabundant information were not very selectively perceived. *Only selective perception can winnow down the overabundance of information into a legible data set, transforming the epistemic chaos into intelligible events and patterns.*

Thus, even mundane facts of politics never speak for themselves: if they did, the din would be overwhelming. However, the selective perception that is necessary to confer intelligibility on some sample of facts creates the possibility of error: not just straightforward perceptual mistakes about who said what or did what, but mistakes in deciding which of the manifold data are signals and which are noise (that is, which putative facts are representative of some important phenomenon, and therefore deserve to be noticed and communicated to others, and which are unimportant or positively misleading, and therefore deserve to be ignored or even suppressed).

4. Given the need for selectivity, those who mediate information to us must inevitably decide which (putative) facts to communicate and which context to set them in. But *they can do this only by drawing on their interpretations of the truth, the representativeness, and the importance of the (putative) facts they are pondering*. These interpretations, in turn, gain plausibility from the sample of purported facts to which the mediators have previously been exposed over the course of their lives—the sample that populates the mediators' webs of belief. Each sample renders certain interpretations plausible and others incomprehensible or far-fetched. Yet these samples, like other inputs into the mediators' webs of belief (such as interpretive schemas), were communicated to them from other fallible, non-omniscient mediators, who selected what to communicate, and how to portray it, on the basis of the interpretations produced by their own webs of belief—which were dependent, in their turn, on these mediators' own exposures to fallible, selectively interpreted facts and schemas communicated to them from still other mediators' webs of belief, *ad infinitum*.

It is true, then, as Lichtenberg says, that it is “testimony,” or epistemic dependence, all the way down (she says “almost” all the way down). Given the need for selectivity, this entails that it is interpretation all the way down (I am willing to subtract the “almost”). Thus, beliefs can perpetuate themselves through *inadvertent* reconfirmation in ever-widening and deepening spirals of selective interpretation, perception, and retransmission—regardless of whether the beliefs are true. In this manner, we become trapped in the closed loops of interpretation that have come to be called “epistemic bubbles” and “echo chambers,” which can fill our heads with untruths and insulate them from criticism.

2 Note that by intellectual charity I am not referring to what analytic philosophers call “interpretive charity,” which is a more natural term for what I mean. Regrettably, philosophers have appropriated the term to refer to the attribution to another of *one's own* ideas, on the grounds that since these one is in possession, supposedly, of the “best” ideas, one should be charitable enough to impute them to others. By contrast, “intellectual” charity is the attempt to find out what others actually think, *especially* when their ideas are different from one's own and thus do not seem to be the “best.” The greatest challenge of intellectual charity is to understand the web of beliefs in another's mind that leads the other to accept a conclusion that one's own web of beliefs leads one to reject. See Friedman 2021.

A Neutral Conception of Universal “Bias”

To integrate these four second-order sources of error into a slogan, we may say that our webs of belief produce *involuntarily biased perceptual screens through which we interpret social causation, others' intentions, and all other types of political “information.”* I use the term *biased* in the neutral sense of “perspectival,” not necessarily in the pejorative sense of “false.”

If an interpretation did not produce some perspective or slant, it would not serve the selectivity function through which it renders part of the overabundant universe of information intelligible. Peering through a selective screen is the only way any of us can attempt to understand an otherwise-illegible world, but all interpretive screens, being the products of partial, fallible human minds that cannot know the totality of the world with perfect accuracy, will have a biased perspective on that world, or on the slice of it being interpreted (the situation being deciphered). Sometimes these biases will coincide with reality, but other times they will not. Of course, we always *think* that that our biases coincide with reality—otherwise we would not believe what we see when we peer through the lenses they provide us—but we are never entitled to *certainty* that they do, as certainty would be warranted only by our access to self-evident truths, and self-evident truths would not need to be viewed through a biased screen. They would present themselves to us as the truth does to an oracle, free of interpretation and the possibility of mistake that goes with it.

Thus, non-radical skepticism, or what Lichtenberg calls “constructive” skepticism, is warranted by the fact that we all find ourselves at the mercy of fallible, non-omniscient interpreters, upon whose epistemic inputs we depend in forming our first-order political opinions. Yet, as we have seen, we have (at least) four second-order reasons to doubt the trustworthiness of those upon whose inputs we must rely. Such reasons indicate that our informants may inadvertently be telling us things that are untrue or misleading because they may, for example, have interpretive biases that do not coincide with reality. While this does not entail that it is impossible to know reality, it does entail that the truth about it is not self-evident. If it were, it would not have to be interpreted.

Nor could the truth be disagreed about. Different selections of information will lead to different perceptions and interpretations of “the” facts. Even people with the same value commitments may reach radically different conclusions about how to achieve shared ends if they build up pictures of the world that are based on different fact perceptions, or pictures that are based on different interpretations of the same fact perceptions (see Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2008). We do not have far to look, then, for an epistemic explanation of political polarization. In principle, empirical political epistemologists should be able to investigate whether differences in fact perceptions and interpretations are the source of a given case of polarization, and to compare this source of polarization to other possible sources, such as value conflicts or personality differences. Differences in fact perceptions and interpretations may, in turn, be traceable to empirical differences in media diet, and to other sources of biased inputs into people’s webs of belief, that can also be empirically investigated.

The Inflation of Lying: A Trumpian Example

Second-order factors such as those discussed above explain how epistemic dependence can lead to inadvertently false beliefs. But these factors also give people the opportunity to deliberately propagate false beliefs by outright lying, nobly lying, bullshitting, gaslighting, spinning, shading the truth, propagandizing, and so on. This is the problem to which Lichtenberg wants to direct the attention of political epistemologists, because she contends that political epistemology must produce moral rules for belief formation, and morality presupposes the appropriateness of blame. We can hardly blame people for *inadvertently* forming false beliefs due to their unavoidable epistemic dependence on fallible, non-omniscient, biased mediators of information about invisible processes, intentions, and mundane facts that have been highlighted as true and important by *necessarily* selective interpretations. But we can blame people, Lichtenberg argues, for freely *choosing* to propagate false beliefs, or for failing to exercise due care in freely choosing which sources of information to trust.

Later on I’ll briefly discuss what I see as the inappropriateness of this voluntaristic framework, which presupposes that meaningful epistemic “choices” are possible. Bracketing that issue for now, however, and given such second-order factors as the four listed above, it seems clear that we would risk ignoring a significant portion of epistemic phenomena if we restricted our attention to those that originate in immoral practices. We would thereby render intelligible only deliberate sources of false beliefs, unintentionally producing a narrow and unrealistic form of political epistemology that ignores inadvertent sources of false beliefs.

Moreover, we might compensate for this narrowness by exaggerating the frequency of deliberately caused false beliefs in comparison to the frequency of inadvertently caused false beliefs—not because we are deliberately trying to deceive our readers, or ourselves, but because deliberately caused false beliefs would be the only kind that we, as moralizing epistemologists, would be looking for. Even more insidiously (but again inadvertently), we might exaggerate how easy it is to determine the truth in politics—a prerequisite to criticizing someone for lying about it. To establish that a lie has been told, one must demonstrate (1) that the putative liar stated what was not true, and (2) that the putative liar *knew* that it was not true. Given the impossibility of mind reading, the easiest way to make the second demonstration is to collapse it into the first by treating the truth in question as self-evident, such that the putative liar *must* have known it, and therefore *must* have been lying when stating otherwise. The assumption of self-evident truth, however, illicitly rules out the alternative hypothesis: that the putative liar was inadvertently ignorant of the truth (or, more accurately, ignorant of what a given moralizing epistemologist believes is the truth), for reasons such as the four listed above.

While liars sometimes make statements or take other actions that indicate their duplicity, it is often difficult or impossible to produce evidence of duplicity (a state of mind), so it is all too common to fall back on the assumption that the truth at issue is so glaringly obvious that the putative liar must have known it, even if we have no evidence of this knowledge. There can be no better example than Donald Trump, whose abysmal ignorance of virtually all matters relevant to the presidency (except how to tweet and give an entertaining rally speech) is something that can be inferred

from listening to his interviews and news conferences; yet who was credited with near-omniscience by fact checkers and other journalists, who interpreted his every false or misleading statement as a lie. This interpretation entailed that he must have known a great deal more than it is plausible to credit any fallible human being with knowing, let alone someone as ignorant and unintelligent as Trump (whose own secretary of state apparently called him a “moron”; Lee et al. 2017).³

The apogee of this journalistic interpretive tendency might well have been a long story stretched across five of the six columns of the front page of the February 1, 2021 *New York Times*: “77 Days; Trump’s Campaign to Subvert the Election: How a Lie Stoked the Assault on the Capital.” The story directly contradicted the sub-head. According to the story, “As Election Day approached, Mr. Trump and those closest to him *believed* that his lead would be insurmountable, their views swayed by the assurances of pro-Trump pundits and the unscientific measure of the size and excitement of the president’s rally crowds” (Rutenberg et al. 2021, my emphasis)—sources of epistemic error of just the sort that I listed above, which would account for Trump’s *inadvertently false* belief that he was about to be re-elected. All election forecasters, including pundits, politicians, and survey researchers, are attempting to read the minds and predict the actions of millions of anonymous others, which is why survey research can and frequently does produce inaccurate predictions. (Indeed, the failure of survey research to predict Trump’s 2016 victory may have fueled his conviction that “scientific” polls could not be trusted in 2020.) “On the morning of the election,” the story continues, one of Trump’s sons “wagered that the president would win at least 320 electoral votes.” In light of this overconfidence, it is hardly surprising that on election night, “Mr. Trump and his entourage fell into enraged *disbelief* as his lead inexorably dissipated” (ibid., my emphasis); or that early the next morning, Trump said on television: “We were getting ready to win this election—frankly, we did win this election.” Yet the reporters declare, of this statement, that it “furiously laid down his post-election *lie*” (ibid., my emphasis)—conflating a mistaken belief with a deliberate falsehood.⁴

Larry Bartels (1993, 267) once called the paucity of media-effects research “one of the most notable embarrassments of modern social science,” and despite some progress since then, especially regarding social media, his complaint still stands. But one would be even more justified in complaining about the paucity of research on the content of the media, the ideas of the mediators, and the sources of those ideas. Moreover, there is no reason to assume that only the *news* media, to which Bartels referred, affect citizens’ political opinions, given that such opinions are produced by expansive webs of belief. The sitcoms and movies citizens watch, the novels they read, the popular music they listen to, and the multitude of other cultural media that contribute to their webs of belief, such as conversation and formal instruction—all are grossly understudied by political scientists. But because the news media have become a particular flashpoint in the epistemic crisis in the United States and elsewhere, I will concentrate on journalists, noting only that similar issues are bound to arise in all media, because all media

are staffed by fallible human interpreters of an opaque world.

Naïve Realism as a Central Concept in Political Epistemology

Although Trump himself would doubtless point to the *Times* story as an example of “lying” by “very bad people” (journalists), it actually seems that it was a textbook case of journalists’ *naïve realism*.

As the term is used by psychologists, naïve realism is the conviction that the objects being interpreted, far from being opaque, are transparent or self-evident. In a classic work of political epistemology, Lee Ross and Andrew Ward (1996, 111) define naïve realism as the assumption “that I see things as they are, that is, that my beliefs, preferences, and resulting responses follow from an essentially unmediated perception of relevant stimuli and incorporation of relevant evidence.” The *Times* reporters seem to have assumed that the truth in which they themselves believed (that Trump had lost) followed from an essentially unmediated perception of a self-evident reality that, as such, must have been as obvious to Trump as it was to them—despite their own reporting of evidence that he *disbelieved* in this reality.

Naïve realists may see the truth as unmediatedly evident to themselves (first-person naïve realism) or else as unmediatedly self-evident to others who enjoy direct access to the truth (third-person naïve realism). The *Times* reporters were victims of both types of naïve realism. Accordingly, they treated what they themselves took to be the truth as so obvious that it must have been instantaneously⁵ self-evident to everyone else, even the ignoramus in the Oval Office. Thus, they overlooked the possibility that the truth about who won the election was opaque enough (at least on Election Night) to induce inadvertently false beliefs—even when evidence for inadvertently beliefs stared them in the face, as it did in their own reporting. Naïve realism thus led them to construe Trump’s belief that he won the election as a lie, despite the evidence they themselves had unearthed that it was a rigidly believed mistake. They did not do this, presumably, because they were deliberately trying to be malicious, but because they honestly assumed, as so many journalists seem to assume, that the truths they perceive are self-evident.

Since 2016, journalists have been quite open about this assumption, which they have proudly advertised as justifying the radical shift in reporting and editing standards that took place after 2015 and is still ongoing (e.g., NPR 2016, Rutenberg 2016, Smith 2020, Weideman 2020, Edmundson 2021). One result of this shift was an avalanche of stories in which reporters attributed duplicity to Trump based solely on the apparent inaccuracy of what he said, and routinely branded as “misinformation” any truth claims, by Trump or anyone else, that contradicted what reporters thought was true. In short, routine journalism came increasingly to be an arena of “fact checking,” with all the naïveté inherent in seeing facts as easy to determine (at least by experts). According to the reporters themselves, these new practices manifested their belief

3 One is reminded of an old Saturday Night Live sketch: https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=ronald+reagan+mastermind+snl. Note that I am not suggesting that it is *self-evident* that Trump was an ignorant moron.

4 The *Times* reporters, and their editors, also forgot that *nobody* “knew,” the morning after the election, that Biden had won the election. The decisive state call, Pennsylvania, was still three days away. Apparently, then, Trump was exaggerating a firmly held but false, even delusory, belief—but not lying.

5 Indeed, retroactively—see previous note.

that they and their expert sources had access to self-evident truths, and that it was their job to make sure that their readers were not misinformed about these truths by immoral political actors.

Exaggerated Confidence among Experts and Mediators of Expertise

Media coverage of the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic presents us with a case study of this naïve journalistic overconfidence. This case also doubles as a study of the overconfidence that can afflict the scientific experts who are so frequently treated as third-person oracles by journalists.

We need science because human beings are so abundantly capable of illusion and error. Precisely because the possibility of error is part of the human condition, however, it is unlikely to be eradicated by any scientific technology (not even randomized controlled experimentation), as scientific findings must always be interpreted by epistemically imperfect human beings. Any particular scientist's opinions, then, should be met with the same non-radical, constructive skepticism that should attend all human claims to knowledge. This is the case even when we have second-order reasons, of the sort that might be provided by a philosophy of science or a philosophy of social science, to think that in general, human beings who use particular scientific methods are likely to make headway against error and illusion. For while we may have *general* reasons to place more confidence in certain types of scientific inquiry than in unrefined inquiries that can be classified as relatively unscientific, we are never entitled to conclude that any *particular* pronouncement made by a scientist is equivalent to certain knowledge, even if this pronouncement is based on findings produced by a philosophically defensible methodology. For this reason, and difficult as this might be to accept, epistemically self-aware scientists would, ideally, never make pronouncements of scientific truth. They would always remain in hypothetical mode, recognizing that tomorrow's finding, interpretation, or scientific revolution may overturn today's settled truths. They would, in short, always keep an open mind.

Political action, however, like the pressure to publish, demands at least provisional epistemic closure. When we act, we have to trade the scientific spirit of self-aware fallibility for a definitive (even if, in principle, probabilistic and temporary) announcement of the truth. In politics, we cannot "follow the science" if the science cannot first be boiled down to a set of firm truths that will guide our actions here and now. Thus, politics exerts a pressure to conflate scientists' opinions with science itself, and a pressure for scientists to be unscientifically overconfident. Those scientists who remain hypothetical, contemplative, and cognizant, in principle, of both known and unknown unknowns will, in effect, tend to select themselves out of the pool of the participants in political debate, where the goal is to make confident, actionable truth claims. Scientist-activists, by contrast, can be expected to have an exaggerated certitude about their own scientific opinions, the better to turn them into action agendas. *Ceteris paribus*, we should expect them to overclaim and overstate, sometimes fostering inadvertently false beliefs on a mass scale when their claims and statements are relayed to the public by journalists (who themselves, if

they are naïve realists, will be prone to overclaiming and overstating). This does not mean, of course, that scientists' opinions are *likelier* than lay opinions to be false, but any given scientist's opinions, like all human opinions, should be treated with a constructive skepticism that is likely to go missing in politics.

Scientific and journalistic overconfidence alike are illustrated by media coverage of the (putative) scientific consensus about whether Covid-19 leaked from a Wuhan laboratory—followed, after nearly a year and a half of media unanimity, by a stunning reversal of course in May 2021. I will review this coverage in enough detail to suggest, by implication, that none of the sources on whom we are epistemically dependent—neither experts nor the fact checkers and other journalists who mediate experts' claims to us—are exempt from inadvertently propagating false beliefs. Thus, they should always be treated with constructive skepticism.

No sooner was the lab-leak hypothesis first voiced, in January 2020, than it was ridiculed by journalists as a baseless conspiracy theory (e.g., Taylor 2020) in a spate of fact-checking journalism that relied upon the apparent consensus of scientists. Thus, when in February, Republican Sen. Tom Cotton argued that the hypothesis had been too quickly dismissed, the mainstream media rose as one to denounce him for promoting a "Fringe Theory of Coronavirus Origins," as the *Times* put it (Stevenson 2020)—a "Coronavirus Conspiracy Theory That Was Already Debunked," as the *Washington Post* declared (Firozi 2020).⁶ The World Health Organization announced that the lab-leak theory was part of an "infovirus" of disinformation (WHO 2020). CNN labeled the lab-leak hypothesis "misinformation" and linked it to other "bunk theories," such as the notion that the coronavirus was somehow spread by 5G technology (Andrew 2020). The network went so far as to create a video intended to debunk the theory, which racked up more than two million views (CNN 2020); a later CNN report likened the hypothesis to "something out of a comic book" (Fox 2021). NPR's "All Things Considered" contributed a dismissive discussion of the lab-leak hypothesis (Brumfiel 2020a), followed by a story reporting that "virus researchers say there is virtually no chance that the new coronavirus was released as result of a laboratory accident in China or anywhere else" (Brumfiel 2020b). Vox (Barclay 2020), Slate (Evans 2020), the Associated Press (Seitz and Dupuy 2020), Politifact (Funke 2020), the *Guardian* (Singh, Davidson, and Borger 2020)—indeed, as far as I can tell, every mainstream news outlet—contributed scathing takedowns of the hypothesis. Yet none of them squarely addressed the circumstantial evidence in its favor: that the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) and the Wuhan Center for Disease Control and Prevention, both of which did research on bat-borne illnesses, were located at the epicenter of the pandemic; that the natural habitat of bats harboring Covid-like viruses was a thousand miles away, three times as far as bats can fly, and that no intermediate animal vector had been found; that U.S. State Department visitors to Wuhan in 2018 had reported that "scientists at the WIV laboratory . . . noted the new lab has a serious shortage of appropriately trained technicians and investigators needed to safely operate this high-containment laboratory" (State Department cable quoted in Rogin 2020); and that the WIV's database of its bat-virus research had been taken offline, without explanation, in September 2019 and had never been restored. The media's denunciations of the lab-leak theory skirted

⁶ The *Post* headline was changed, 15 months later (with an editor's note), to read "A Coronavirus Fringe Theory That Scientists Have Disputed."

this evidence by relying almost entirely on testimony from scientists who simply asserted that a lab leak was virtually impossible. On the strength of these assertions, the theory was buried under a mountain of journalistic contempt.

Looking back on this episode in June 2021, Thomas Frank trenchantly described the effect of journalists' overconfidence on those of us who are epistemically dependent on the mainstream media:

We cast blame so innocently in those days. We scolded at will. We knew who was right and we shook our heads to behold those in the wrong. . . . A few months ago I even tried to talk a Fox News viewer out of believing in the lab-leak theory of Covid's origins. The reason I did that is because the newspapers I read and the TV shows I watched had assured me on many occasions that the lab-leak theory wasn't true, that it was a racist conspiracy theory, that only deluded Trumpists believed it, that it got infinite pants-on-fire ratings from the fact-checkers, and because (despite all my cynicism) I am the sort who has always trusted the mainstream news media. (Frank 2021)

However, Frank was able to rethink his acceptance of the mainstream narrative only because it suddenly collapsed in May 2021, for reasons that are still somewhat mysterious. A key event seems to have been a one-page letter published in *Science* on May 14 protesting against the biased dismissal of the lab-leak theory by other scientists (Bloom et al. 2021). Within days, almost as many respectful media stories about the lab-leak theory appeared (e.g., Shear et al. 2021) as there had been dismissive stories in February 2020. The media reversal was so stark that by the end of May 2021, the Biden administration had pledged to produce an intelligence report on the origins of the virus.

Yet the *Science* letter did not present any new evidence in favor of the lab-leak hypothesis, nor did any of the subsequent journalism. The only "new" fact was that three WIV employees appear to have been hospitalized with Covid-like symptoms in the fall of 2019, before the first Covid-19 cases were publicly disclosed. This fact, however, which was now reported in the *Wall Street Journal* (Gordon, Strobel, and Hinshaw 2021), had been announced by the Trump State Department in January, 2021, five months before the media decided, *en masse*, to mention it (Department of State 2021). Apparently, then, it was only after the Biden administration took office that it became acceptable for reporters to give the lab-leak hypothesis careful consideration rather than snidely discrediting it.

In this interpretation of what happened, journalists had, from January 2020 through April 2021, naïvely treated their scientific sources as oracles and had inferred that those who disagreed with them were, *ipso facto*, liars (or fools). This procedure is inherently partisan in the broad sense of being one-sided or doctrinaire, as it necessarily exempts one's own beliefs, or the beliefs of naïvely interpreted (oracular) third parties, from the suspicion of untrust-

worthiness. Only beliefs with which one disagrees are likely to be counted as lies (or foolish), because only those beliefs seem not to be self-evidently true.

An alternative explanation, not incompatible with the first, is that motivated reasoning came into play among both journalists and scientists, or perhaps other sources of dogmatism such as the "spiral of conviction," where it is not a goal-oriented motive that leads to undue certainty but the need to interpret the blooming, buzzing confusion if it is to become legible (Friedman 2019b, ch. 5). Any interpretation will render interpretation-congruent information more intelligible and plausible than interpretation-incongruent information, screening the former into the interpreter's web of beliefs and screening out the latter. Thus, we can be expected to accumulate more interpretation-congruent than -incongruent information, leading to an increasingly biased collection of confirmatory evidence that can blind us to the merits of alternative interpretations—even though our goal, contrary to motivated-reasoning theory, is to hold accurate beliefs. This would explain the motivated-skepticism finding that the relatively well informed tend to be more dogmatic than the relatively uninformed (e.g., Taber and Lodge 2006): those who are relatively well informed, such as journalists, scientists, and other experts, have encountered a greater quantity of evidence about the issues in which they specialize, leading them to accumulate more confirmatory evidence for their interpretive schemas than those who are poorly informed. It stands to reason that this would ratchet up the confidence of the well informed in the underlying interpretation, perhaps to the point of overconfidence.

Yet another (not incompatible) explanation for the undue certitude of the initial media coverage is that ideological or partisan biases, in the narrow sense, were at work, above and beyond mere dogmatism or a naïve trust in "science." Jonathan Chait (2021a), one of the few working journalists who has expressed alarm over the implications of this episode, points out that "the origins of COVID-19 were always hazy, and China's lack of transparency created significant doubt." Reporters, in his view, "looked at the uncertainty and fell back on an impulse to straightforwardly call out racist lies, even though the evidence to call it lies was quite threadbare." (At the end of May 2021, a *Times* coronavirus reporter tweeted, then deleted: "Someday we will stop talking about the lab leak theory and maybe even admit its racist roots" [Ellelson 2021].) "The outlets that fared worst," Chait maintains, "were those like the *Guardian*, Slate, and Vox . . . which embraced a 'moral clarity' ethos of forgoing traditional journalistic norms of restraint and objectivity in favor of calling out lies and bigotry" (Chait 2021b).

Lichtenberg bemoans those very norms, which (before Trump) constrained journalists from offering their own opinions, at least explicitly, about which political truth claims are true. She objects that this constraint led to "false equivalence" by allowing the respectful treatment even of "outlandish" truth claims (those that are made by the epistemically vicious, such as liars).⁷ Chait, by contrast, recognizes that when journalists treat their own judgments about *which* truth claims are outlandish as if these judgments are

7 A less optimistic perspective on "false equivalence" and journalistic "objectivity" is provided by *Rolling Stone* journalist Matt Taibbi (2021). Contrary to what he calls "the 'objectivity doesn't mean giving equal time to Republicans' bit that has become so popular in the industry of late," he maintains, what is now called false equivalence, or "the 'on the one hand and on the other hand' format," was "just a defense mechanism. These people say X, these people say Y, and because the jabbering mannequins we have reading off our teleprompters actually know jack, we'll let the passage of time sort out the difficult bits. The public used to appreciate the humility of this approach, but what they get from us more often now are sanctimonious speeches about how reporters are intrepid seekers of truth who sit next to God and gobble amphetamines so they can stay awake all night defending democracy from 'misinformation.'" There is much here for political epistemologists to chew on. Perhaps, in the future, the empiricists among us might venture into newsrooms and interview journalists to look into such gritty realities as those Taibbi is describing.

self-evidently warranted, they may simply be broadcasting their own biases. Thus, he finds in lab-leak journalism not only a major embarrassment for the media, but a cause for future concern, because it suggests (to him) the possibility of systematic media bias.

Escaping First-Order Circularity

Political epistemologists, however, have to wonder how much weight to give cases like the one discussed in the last section, and how best to evaluate them. Have we any reason to suspect that such cases are widespread? Perhaps this was a one-off, an understandable journalistic overreaction to the Trump administration's apparent mendacity. And even if mistakes like this are common, would it really portend anything disturbing? Since the consensus of journalists eventually corrected itself, perhaps we are entitled to say that "the system worked" (Rauch 2021).

This optimistic view, however, not only hypostasizes into a functional "system" what is actually a collection of fallible journalists and scientists and changeable norms; it has the effect of discounting the question of *why* these people displayed so much certainty in this case. If such factors as political bias, motivated reasoning, or a spiral of conviction were at work, then it would seem that such cases might be quite frequent—as frequent as we think these second-order phenomena are likely to afflict fallible human interpreters—and that, depending on that frequency, they may only infrequently be corrected, as they happened to be in this case. Still, it is no easy matter to estimate such frequencies. In fact, it is probably impossible. We "know" that journalists displayed excessive certainty in this case only because, in May 2021, they suddenly changed their minds and informed the rest of us that the truth was not nearly so clear-cut as they had made it seem for nearly sixteen months. But in other cases of collective error, in which the media herd does not change its mind, how would we ever find out that the herd might have been wrong?

Political epistemologists might respond to this problem by, say, attempting directly to fact-check some putatively representative sample of journalists' own fact checks. But this would reduce political epistemology to a set of tendentious first-order claims about which side is right in an endless number of political disagreements. In selecting the cases to be examined and in passing judgment on who was right in these cases, political epistemologists—unless we somehow hermetically sealed ourselves off from media influence—might ourselves inadvertently incorporate unrecognized media mistakes into our assessments of whether the media were mistaken. Any attempt to evaluate media performance against our own (first-order) standards, by quantifying the ratio of cases in which *we perceive* the media to have blown it versus cases in which *we believe* that they got the story right, would risk circularity. We could be trapped in an epistemic bubble created by the very media output whose accuracy we are trying to judge.

An elegant but exceptional aspect of the lab-leak case is that it suggests the possibility of frequent media errors—when taken in conjunction with second-order factors such as motivated reasoning or bias—*without* requiring us to take any first-order positions. We need not pass judgment on the accuracy of the lab-leak hypothesis to notice that, either in 2020 and the first four months of 2021, or in May 2021, the media must have gotten matters terribly wrong, since their collective position changed so radically. This is a special instance of the general dictum that the truth cannot

be self-evident if there is disagreement about it. In this case, the disagreement was diachronic, pitting the mainstream media at T₁ against the mainstream media at T₂. Either way, they were terribly mistaken at one point. Thus, the lab-leak example points us toward a feasible and modest form of political epistemology that eschews first-order case-by-case analysis in favor of second-order systematic analysis. However, this form of analysis would bar political epistemologists from labeling the first-order ideas they wish to study as "misinformation," let alone "disinformation."

The charges of misinformation and disinformation are inherent to all first-order political disagreement. Those with whom one disagrees *must*—in one's first-order opinion—be malinformed, whether through inadvertently communicated untruths (misinformation) or those that are deliberately communicated (disinformation). When fact checkers and other journalists label a truth claim "misinformation" or "disinformation," they have abandoned any pretense of transcending the first-order disputes they are covering in favor of participating in them. Yet political epistemologists have second-order reasons to think that anyone's first-order, epistemically dependent political opinions, including those of fact checkers and other journalists, scientists and other experts, and political epistemologists themselves, *might* be inaccurate—which is why disagreement occurs in the first place, and why it is of interest to political epistemologists. Therefore, it seems to me incumbent on political epistemologists to recuse themselves from first-order position taking.

The Michigan School as an Example of Restraint

Is this self-denying stance feasible, or does it suggest an impossible "view from nowhere"?

The Michigan school of opinion research demonstrates that in fact it is quite feasible. Starting with Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes's *The American Voter* (1960), the Michigan scholars consistently treated political actors' opinions *as* opinions, bracketing whether they were true or false. This practice insulated the researchers from taking sides in first-order controversies while they investigated second-order factors, whatever opinions they might have had about which side in these controversies was right. Rather than condemning citizens for holding political opinions that were uninformed by what this or that Michigan researcher thought it important for citizens to know, their research established widespread public ignorance of what John Zaller (1992, 43) called "neutral, factual public affairs knowledge"—civics trivia, essentially, which is unimportant to know for almost any first-order purpose. Yet by establishing widespread ignorance of this trivia, the Michigan school ingeniously suggested an important second-order claim: that most Americans in the mid-twentieth century were paying so little attention to politics that they *might* have been ignorant of whatever a given observer thought it important to know—without taking a first-order position on what, in fact, it *was* important for most Americans to know, and therefore a position on what was, in fact, true. By the same token, political epistemologists might investigate patterns of media consumption that seem relatively likely, on second-order grounds, to lead to false beliefs, but without pronouncing that this or that belief produced by such a pattern of media consumption is false.

An important side benefit of such research is that it may have the effect of calling into question the researchers' own first-order convictions. In *Democratic Reason*, H el ene Landemore relates her contemporaneous outrage that her fellow French citizens had rejected the EU constitution in a 2005 referendum, but notes that after reflecting on second-order factors such as the Condorcet Jury Theorem, she came to doubt her initial reaction (Landemore 2013, xv). This is how political epistemology works when it brackets political epistemologists' own political views: second-order analysis may undermine or even reverse our first-order views. This renders political epistemology worthwhile philosophically as well as scientifically.

Philosophically, research that can unsettle the researcher's own politics is less likely to be special pleading for a predetermined political conclusion, while research predicated on the researcher's first-order opinions necessarily begs the epistemic question: the question of how the researcher knows the truth in the face of second-order reasons for uncertainty about first-order opinions—reasons that justify the research to begin with. Scientifically, only political epistemology that eschews first-order position taking is likely to achieve the empirical goal of understanding those with whom one disagrees rather than condemning them for failing to see, or to acknowledge, the truths the researcher holds dear. If I am trying to understand why you believe proposition p , my judgment that p is false contributes nothing at all, since clearly you don't share this judgment, and it is your opinion that I am trying to understand. The ontic question of whether p is actually true is irrelevant to the epistemic question of why you believe it to be true.

Only to na ive realists does it seem that true beliefs possess some innate persuasive appeal, namely the quality of self-evidence, that might explain why they (the na ive realists themselves) hold those beliefs. This bridging of the ontic/epistemic gap creates the conundrum that those with whom the na ive realists disagree seem, somehow, to have failed to cross the same bridge. Indeed, a logical consequence of na ive realism is the conviction that everyone *should* know the truth, since it is self-evident, such that any apparent disagreement can be explained away as the product of liars, bullshitters, gaslighters, and so on. No recognition of genuine, reasonable disagreement can follow from this approach, and thus there can be no sympathetic understanding of others' reasons for disagreeing with one's own views.

Political epistemologists, by eschewing tacit appeals to self-evidence, such as the claim that someone must be lying, bullshitting, or gaslighting in order to assert p (or the claim that, as Lichtenberg puts it, "it's just not that difficult" to tell if p is false), can clear the ground for asking why people—including themselves—believe *either* p or not- p . This includes the important question of why people may not only believe in a given proposition but believe it to be self-evident, which could be attributable, for example, to the epistemic bubbles and echo chambers they inhabit. Indeed, in this light, people's attribution of views with which they disagree to the actions of moral miscreants, such as liars, would count as a second-order mechanism by means of which an epistemic bubble—a social environment in which a certain bias is strengthened through reiteration—becomes an echo chamber in which only that bias is permitted, others being discredited as lies or nonsense. This mechanism itself would seem to be a worthy topic for both empirical and normative research.

In sum, by bracketing the issue of whether this or that first-order belief is true, political epistemology becomes capacious enough to understand, and then to explain, everyone's first-order political beliefs, not just those with which a given political epistemologist agrees.

Second-Order Epistemic Research

The dangers of the inherently (although not deliberately) tendentious alternative approach are exemplified by much of the empirical research cited by Lichtenberg. For reasons of space I will discuss just one of these papers, by Vosoughi et al. (2018), which finds that a certain set of novel ideas traveled farther and faster on Twitter in 2006-2017 than did a certain set of unsurprising ideas. This finding may be suggestive of an important second-order epistemic phenomenon, but the authors, who fail to observe the first-order/second-order distinction, conflate two different interpretations of what this phenomenon is.

One interpretation is reflected in the paper's title, "The Spread of True and False News Online," and in the paper's rhetoric, which consistently depicts the research as addressing "how falsity diffuses differently than truth" (ibid., 1146). Establishing which truth claims are false and which are true is (in effect) *the* central first-order project engaged in, deliberately or not, by all political actors involved in political debate, defined broadly as the contestation of political claims. The authors, then, have fallen into the trap of engaging in the very type of debate that they are attempting to analyze.

The other interpretation, however, does not fall into this trap. In this view, what the authors have discovered is that *novel* news spreads faster and farther online than does non-novel (unsurprising) news (ibid.). This finding suggests the possibility that the titular "false" news spread faster and farther not because it was false, but because it was novel. The authors fail to recognize, unfortunately, that these two interpretations are different and potentially contradictory.

True ideas can be more novel than false ones. And false ideas can be widely held and thus unsurprising, just as can true ideas. By connecting the two binaries, true/false and conventional/novel, the paper's rhetoric creates the unwarranted impression that the study shows that false ideas, as such, travel farther and faster than true ones. Yet the authors have not discovered some occult quality in false ideas, *beyond* their novelty (when they are novel), that gives them an inherent attractiveness. Nor do they actually establish that the relatively novel ideas were, in fact, false. Instead, they farm out this task to a consensus of fact checkers, i.e., journalists who specialize in proclaiming which ideas are true and which are false—more often than not, by quoting experts whom they find credible. The lab-leak fiasco suggests how easily this type of na ive realism can go awry. Indeed, the paper's conflation of truth with fact checkers' consensus beliefs about what is true may explain why the opinions deemed true in the study did not go viral. Insofar as a consensus among fact checkers is likely to reflect the conventional wisdom, the particular ideas that were designated "true" by a consensus of fact checkers might have been seen by Twitter users as so well known that they were not worth tweeting or retweeting.

It seems to me that the authors could have done worse than to follow the example of the Michigan school by bracketing the truth-value of the novel beliefs. This would have enabled their find-

ing about novelty to spawn further second-order research without entangling it with the (admittedly trendy and attention-getting)⁸ question of misinformation—and, therefore, without treating fact checkers, or their expert sources, as oracles. Of course, one might want to make a second-order argument for the reliability of fact checking based on the methods fact checkers use, or for the reliability of the methods used by the experts on whom fact checkers rely. One might thus fault the authors for failing even to allude to such an argument.⁹ However, while political epistemologists should certainly consider making such arguments (or contesting them),¹⁰ it should not have been necessary for a study of this sort to broach the issue at all, as the first-order question of the truth or falseness of particular opinions circulated on Twitter is irrelevant to the second-order question of whether novel opinions circulate farther and wider there than do unsurprising opinions.

This study, therefore, seems to me emblematic of some of the dangers of analyzing disinformation or misinformation *per se*, rather than the second-order factors, such as novelty, partisan bias, ideological bias, motivated reasoning, spirals of conviction, fact checkers' methods, journalists' methods, natural scientists' methods, or social scientists' methods, that might systematically promote the acceptance of (a) true or (b) false beliefs, but without asserting that (a) or (b) happened in any given case or cases. Such assertions reduce political epistemology to questionable epistemic claims of just the sort that its practitioners are attempting to understand and explain. And in so doing, they tendentiously beg the question of how the researchers, or third parties such as journalists or experts, have transcended the epistemic problems under study. Therefore, they court both circularity and inaccuracy.

Epistemic Personalization and Authoritarianism

The equation of fact checkers' or experts' opinions with the truth, or a better approximation of it than can be attributed to ordinary people, is premised on the assumption that a certain set of human beings has transcended human ignorance and fallibility or is well on its way to doing so. The search for epistemically exceptional people of this sort leads us to behave as naïve third-person realists, particularly with regard to those who lay claim to some method, such as science, that corrects the errors and dispels the illusions that may afflict the opinions of the rest of us. Even if it is true that a certain type of science does *tend* to correct error and dispel illusions, this does not justify conflating science with the scientific opinions held by particular scientists, as can be seen in the lab-leak episode. The journalistic herd would not have gone so far astray had it not equated science with the opinions of scientists, whom they treated as *epistemic authorities*—trusted not on the impersonal basis of the evidence and argumentation they adduce (which, as epistemic dependents, journalists are in no special position to judge), but on the basis of personal heuristics for membership in a trustworthy group (heuristics such as academic credentials or re-

search grants). This personalization of knowledge launders particular experts' knowledge *claims* into knowledge *itself* by conferring on the former the magic touch of epistemic prestige.

But this is not to charge the journalists who search for epistemic authorities with committing a culpable epistemic sin. It is difficult to imagine any other practical method of dealing with epistemic dependence than epistemic authoritarianism, especially given journalists' newfound desire to communicate unquestionable truths rather than balanced, "objective" coverage of conflicting truth claims. Moreover, even in the pre-2016 days of putatively balanced, objective coverage, journalists merely delegated the question of whom to trust to readers and viewers who were left to sort out the competing claims but were, if anything, even more epistemically dependent than the journalists themselves. And it has to be said that behind the now-abandoned apparatus of journalistic "objectivity" stood the inherently selective, interpretive, and thus subjective and biased process of choosing which issues, which sides of an issue, and which spokespeople for those sides to report on, and how to report on them. Media bias is not an effect of journalists' reactions against Donald Trump; it is as old as journalism itself, because journalists (whether they know it or not) confront an opaque world, and there is no way for anyone to make such a world intelligible save through interpretation, which is inherently biased.

Journalists' attempt to cut this Gordian knot by appealing to epistemic authorities, too, seems to predate the Trump administration. For what it is worth, my impression (in an area where the research has yet to be done) is that the appeal to epistemic authority, while perhaps an omnipresent undercurrent in twentieth-century American journalism, received a major boost in 2003, when the fact-checking movement as a distinct branch of journalism was born. In turn, once "facts" became firmly associated with "fact checks" that explicitly treated experts as epistemic authorities, it may have only been a matter of time until journalists began to argue that these authorities' decisions about the truth should be enforced by the ultimate authority, the state—an argument that first began to be heard in the United States, if I am not mistaken, after the 2020 election, in response to the spread of QAnon and its role in the Capitol Hill riot (to which I will return).

For example, the *Times's* Kevin Roose (2021)—citing experts, of course—contended in February 2021 that our "muddled, chaotic information system" had led to a "national reality crisis" that may demand "something like a reality czar" in response. In short, he was saying that experts tell us that experts should be legally empowered to decide what is real. Soon enough, the Biden administration began pressuring social-media companies to stop allowing misinformation about the coronavirus to be circulated. At that juncture, however, social-media companies had already been censoring speculation about a Wuhan lab leak for more than a year—precisely because it had been tagged as coronavirus misinformation by epistemic authorities (Pietsch 2020).

⁸ According to Semantic Scholar, the paper had been cited more than 2,000 times by August 2021.

⁹ Similarly, one might fault the authors for attempting to check the reliability of the fact checkers by having MIT and Wellesley students do their own fact checks by "using simple search queries on the web" (Vosoughi et al. 2018, 1150)—as if the truth, rather than the consensus view, is likely to be obtained this way. The answers to such queries are provided by algorithms that track the popularity of certain answers given by fallible human beings, not—*per impossibile*—the answers' truth. This simplistic approach to the truth, which deems it readily attained by non-"vicious" observers, is the implicit assumption of naïve realism.

¹⁰ See a preliminary debate about the epistemology of fact checking: Uscinski and Butler 2013, Amazeen 2015, and Uscinski and Butler 2015.

“Post-Truth” as Unsuppressed Disagreement among Naïve Realists

With the addition of epistemic authoritarianism to naïve realism in our conceptual toolkit, we may be able to produce an epistemologically sensitive interpretation of the broader historical context of what Lichtenberg, following many others, calls our “post-truth” era.

Unobjectionably, she notices that something significantly changed in the late 1980s, when the end of the FCC’s Fairness Doctrine gave birth to Rush Limbaugh’s program and then a host of imitators on conservative talk radio. But it is difficult to credit her attempt to connect the rise of conservative talkers to “post-modern” ideas that (supposedly) amounted to a relativistic or nihilistic war on truth. As anyone who has spent time listening to conservative talkers can affirm (I often heard them during the years 2006–2016, while driving long distances across south Texas), their stock in trade was not relativism or nihilism but media criticism. Apparently thanks to their efforts, and parallel efforts on Fox News (created in 1996)—which was advertised as “Fair and Balanced” *in contrast to* the mainstream media—the attention of the Republican base seems to have shifted from primarily opposing progressive policies to primarily opposing the biases propagated by “liberal media elites” and the experts cited by those elites. This shift of emphasis would not have been possible had the conservative media critics rejected the concepts of truth and reality or the existence and importance of facts, as the “post-truth” thesis would have it. On the contrary: the media critics’ unambiguous point, reiterated daily in great detail, was that due to left-wing bias, mainstream media elites misrepresented *reality* by reporting “facts” that are not factual and ignoring truths that are self-evident (such as the success of free markets and the nobility of the Constitution). Whatever “postmodernism” is, this wasn’t it.

There was, however, one aspect of the conservative media critique that *looked* postmodern: its (partial) acknowledgement of the social construction, not of reality itself, but of perceptions of reality. In this view, human culture, broadly construed to include media messaging as well as other forms of pedagogy and propaganda, can produce totalistic worldviews that have verisimilitude for those who are embedded in them—even if these worldviews do not, in fact, accurately depict the world. Yet this type of social constructivism is as premodern and modern as it is postmodern. The idea of an epistemic bubble is merely a contemporary version of Plato’s cave or Descartes’ evil demon. The fundamental point—that human beings may sincerely believe in illusions—has been echoed by everyone from Walter Lippmann ([1922] 1997) to Marxist critics of bourgeois ideology and false proletarian consciousness. It is an implication of the work of any epistemologist, myself included, who recognizes the possibility of widespread and tenacious false beliefs among fallible human beings. Any epistemologist who did *not* recognize this possibility would be ignoring the fact that we get most of our ideas about the world from fallible informants—Lichtenberg’s starting point. As a practical matter, such an epistemologist would be a naïve realist.

This is not to say, however, that the conservative critique of “liberal media elites” is epistemologically sophisticated. Not only is it predicated on the putative self-evidence of the truths rejected by media “elites,” but accordingly, it attributes to these elites *conscious* ideological biases that *deliberately* misrepresent the self-evident truth. In short, the conservative talkers and their successors

at Fox, Breitbart, Newsmax, OneAmerica, the *Epoch Times*, 4chan, 8chan, and so on are not only naïve realists; they take the moralist’s condemnatory approach to those with whom they disagree, reducing media bias to a skein of “lies.” They also rely upon a primitive class analysis in which media “elites” treat as true what they know to be false so as to retain their power and privileges. This combination of naïve realism, moralism, and anti-elitism converges on an *epistemic populism* that often crosses into a conspiracy theory that pits lying media and academic elites against ordinary people who, thank goodness, are still in touch with the “common sense” that allows them to see the self-evident truths that elites keep trying to obscure.

To the millions of people trapped in this epistemic-populist bubble, conservative media critique offers, through its rejection of mainstream culture, an alternative to the false reality constructed by liberal media elites. But the whole point of this alternative is that it is supposed to be *true*. Only in the eyes of naïve realists on the other side of the political divide—journalists and scholars trapped in various technocratic and progressive epistemic bubbles of their own—could the conservative critique appear to be a rejection of reality, a relativistic or nihilistic assault on truth, or a repudiation of facts, science, and expertise—rather than a persistent effort to fact check what the conservative populists see as bogus intellectual authorities who deliberately subordinate reality to their ideology. If one assumes that technocratic or progressive truths are self-evident because that is how they are treated in one’s epistemic bubble (or echo chamber), then a populist critique of these truths and their “elite” proponents is likely to present itself as a fearsome repudiation of facts and reality themselves. This fear, duplicating populists’ fear of progressive “elites,” transforms the epistemic contradiction that is inherent in disagreement into an epic struggle in which both sides view the other as engaged in a “war against truth” rather than a war *about* truth, i.e., about which truth claims are true and which of them are false. Thus, the naïve realism of both sides turns what might otherwise have been seen as differences of opinion about the truth—which are all but inevitable, given the opacity of the political world—into furious, escalating epistemic confrontations, with each side ever more outraged by the other side’s “deliberate” attempts to “gaslight” the public by fostering doubt about the self-evident truth.

The popularity of the gaslighting trope for both sides in the epistemic war is worth lingering over. The concern about gaslighting targets one’s political opponents’ encouragement of *uncertainty* about one’s own side’s beliefs. Yet uncertainty is the starting point of science and scholarship. Uncertainty (constructive skepticism) gives rise to the demand for logical rigor and meticulous empirical evidence in support of any claim that one makes. So long as we are in a domain in which the truth is not self-evident, uncertainty is appropriate. Yet in political warfare among naïve realists, demands for rigor and meticulousness are rejected as unethical attempts to reduce certainty, as if certainty is ever warranted in politics.

While charges of gaslighting, lying, bullshitting, and so on are made by both sides in the ongoing epistemic war, this conflict is in other respects asymmetrical. The conservative-populist side, for example, seems to be relatively more disposed (at least for the moment) to rage and paranoia, which could be due to the fact that the mainstream left is in a decidedly superior strategic position across the epistemic landscape, from the prestige news media to book publishers, universities, high art, and popular culture. This must be

both infuriating and frightening for those in the conservative-populist bubble, who see mainstream cultural power routinely exercised to portray *them* as the liars and fantasists—even though, in their minds, they are the champions of truth against mainstream gaslighting. Nor is it surprising that those in the conservative-populist bubble should be persuaded of the truth of ever-more-bizarre conspiracy theories in comparison to those that gain currency in mainstream bubbles, such as the notion that a landslide election was stolen from Trump or that he was battling a worldwide conspiracy of pederasts and baby killers led by Hillary Clinton. These are some of the ideas to which one will be exposed if one flees from the mainstream media to conservative-populist alternatives. And they are ideas that make a kind of Manichean sense of the epistemic power asymmetry between the mainstream and conservative-populist bubbles, by attributing the superior reach of the former to a diabolically ruthless and effective conspiracy of elites.

Consider Adam Newbold, a former Navy SEAL who, in 2015, had personally confronted a paranoid conspiracy theory about operation Jade Helm 15, a military training exercise in Texas with which he was involved as a contractor. When conservative populist Alex Jones depicted Jade Helm 15 as “a covert plot to have federal troops invade Texas, seize citizens’ guns and impose martial law,” Newbold rejected this notion as “fringe ravings” (Phillips 2021). Yet in 2021 he joined the Capitol Hill mob, convinced that “mountains of evidence of election fraud and voter fraud” supported, as *Times* reporter Dave Phillips puts it, “the fabricated theory that the election was rigged by a shadowy cabal of liberal power brokers.” Phillips goes on to say that “Mr. Newbold is a longtime registered Republican who said he voted for Mr. Trump. In the past four years, as mainstream media coverage of the president grew harsher, and Mr. Newbold’s sometimes strident support on Facebook drew more rebukes, he migrated to news sources and chat rooms that shared his views” (ibid.). Is it any wonder that, having lost his trust in the accuracy of the mainstream media, he fell prey to whatever myths he discovered elsewhere?¹¹

I offer these compressed, epistemically oriented hypotheses about the rise and consequences of conservative populism¹² in the hope of contributing to a sympathetic understanding of *both* sides of a momentous political conflagration that is usually portrayed as a one-sided eruption of either mass insanity or “epistemic vice.” In the latter portrayal, Newbold should be condemned for the “contemptible” practices of failing to “evaluate the evidence and counter-evidence” and being “indifferent to the truth” (Meyer, Alfano, and de Bruin 2021, 2, 1)—even though, from his perspective, the blame should rest squarely on the shoulders of reporters such as Phillips, who, in calling the Big Steal idea “fraudulent,” contemptibly demonstrate indifference to the “mountains of evidence” for the Big Steal, evidence that Phillips must have failed to evaluate (or evidence that he knew about, evaluated affirmatively, and lied to his readers about). However, with the intellectual charity made possible by abandoning naïve realism, we can allow that both New-

bold and Phillips were doing their best to find the truth, *given their webs of belief*—regardless of which of them succeeded in finding it. It was hardly contemptible for Phillips to ignore what the *Epoch Times* was reporting about vote fraud given his web of beliefs, which seems likely to have produced the judgment that his employer, the *New York Times*, is a more reliable source than the *Epoch Times*, which devoted far more respectful attention to accusations of a Big Steal. Nor is Newbold contemptible for “ignoring” the constantly reiterated *Timesian* view that the Big Steal was a baseless, unsubstantiated, unproven, crazy, debunked, false, outlandish Big Lie, as every mainstream story seemed to label it. For if Phillips’s reporting can be believed, Newbold’s journey to Capitol Hill began with his loss of faith in the reliability of the mainstream media, whose insistent debunking he did not so much ignore as reject as more of the same gaslighting that had powered its pre-election campaign against Trump.

More generally, intellectually charitable political epistemologists will recognize that our “choices” about what to believe and whom to trust are not, in fact, under our control, so it is inappropriate to subject them to moral condemnation. These choices are determined by webs of thousands of interrelated beliefs on the basis of which each of us involuntarily interprets truth claims as intelligible or outlandish and truth claimants, including media sources, as trustworthy or unreliable, “fair and balanced” or “biased,” credible or incredible. It is inappropriate to blame people for such interpretations because it is impossible for them to will themselves to trust a source that their web of beliefs registers as untrustworthy. The voluntaristic notion of epistemic “choice” has no purchase for the same reason that it militates against intellectual charity: it precludes understanding the political other’s reasons for her epistemic decisions, which are invariably reasons that, to her, are reasonable, regardless of whether they seem reasonable to epistemologically moralistic observers who disagree with these decisions. In the intellectually charitable understanding of Newbold, his web of beliefs led him to lose trust in the mainstream media, and the alternative media diet that he then *rationaly* consumed *involuntarily* led him to conclude that the election had been stolen. This conclusion may not have been warranted—one can be rational yet mistaken—but only by bracketing the first-order question of whether it was mistaken can we understand why he participated in the Capitol Hill riot, from his own perspective.

By taking sides in first-order epistemic conflicts, the moralistic epistemologist forecloses the possibility of standing back to understand all sides. However, the moralistic approach faithfully reflects the naïve realism that, at least arguably, is responsible for the contemptuous, aggrieved, and increasingly violent manner in which political actors react to political disagreement. It can itself, therefore, be considered a product of one of the most important phenomena that political epistemologists can set themselves to understand. In this light, it seems to me that moralistic epistemology is something to be studied, not emulated. ■

¹¹ This paragraph is adapted from Friedman 2020, 356.

¹² My analysis here differs substantially from my argument about populism in Friedman 2019a, where I discuss more conventionally recognized features of populism such as the embrace of nationalism and a strong leader. The earlier analysis may be credible as an understanding of why a body of poorly educated Democrats and independents voted for Trump, while the present analysis is more applicable to the Republicans who eventually voted for him and continue to support him as of the summer of 2021.

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From the Literature

Research on Ideas and Knowledge in Political Theory

Paul Gunn, Goldsmith’s, University of London

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Research on Ideas and Knowledge in American Politics

Sean Freeder, University of North Florida

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Research on Ideas and Knowledge in International Relations

Adam B. Lerner

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Research on Political Knowledge in Comparative Politics

Nick Clark, Susquehanna University

The research on political knowledge within a comparative context has largely focused on identifying and understanding institutional and behavioral sources of variation in the knowledge of citizens across countries, and the implications of such variation for the quality of democratic governance and transparency.

Much of the Americanist research on political knowledge focuses on individual-level attributes that may explain variation in levels of factual knowledge, including education, gender, age, income, and different measures of political engagement (e.g., Converse 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Althaus 2003). The comparative literature seeks to build on that foundation by examining ways in which the broader context may directly or indirectly shape levels of political knowledge within countries.

Generally, the comparative literature confirms the findings of the Americanist research, primarily that most publics are not as well informed as might be hoped (Gronlund and Milner 2006; Fortin-Rittberger 2016), although the extent of information deficits varies from one country to the next (Arnold 2012). The same individual-level correlates of knowledge emerge in most countries,

with pronounced gender- and education-based disparities in how much people know about politics (Fraile 2014; Fraile and Gomez 2015).

The earlier comparative work attributes variation in political knowledge to the institutional environment. Gordon and Segura (1997) argue that types of party system and electoral institution influence the relative costs and benefits of acquiring political information; essentially, information is more plentiful in multiparty systems that require political parties to differentiate themselves from the political competition. Granberg and Holmberg (1988) similarly find that the Swedish public is better able to identify the issue positions of different parties largely because those parties more clearly communicate such positions in order to be competitive within the electoral system. Such differences in electoral systems may also moderate the influence of individual-level predictors. For instance, the correlation between education and knowledge weakens in environments that disperse information to a wider swath of the population (Berggren 2001). Additionally, systems that lead to the election of more women are associated with a decline in the gender-based knowledge gap amongst young adults (Dassonneville and McAllister 2018).

This institutional approach has extended beyond electoral systems. Hellwig (2011) demonstrates that a vertical distribution of power (such as in a federal system) may undermine the concentration of responsibility and make it more difficult for individuals

to trace the policy process or understand policy outcomes. Clark (2017) indicates that the public has fewer opportunities to observe and learn about politics in institutional environments that undermine the rule of law, accountability, and transparency.

A significant body of work has also examined the extent to which information environments might explain cross-country variations in knowledge. The systems governing the production and delivery of news vary across countries (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), with public service-based media systems providing more opportunities for individuals to encounter informative news content than market-based systems (Iyengar et al. 2010; Aalberg and Curran 2012; Soroka et al. 2013). Moreover, exposure to broadsheet-based publications within public service-based systems serves to lower the knowledge gap within countries (Fraile 2013; Fraile and Iyengar 2014).

Research on the implications of knowledge inequalities is largely consistent with findings in the American context. Several comparative studies have noted that low levels of knowledge may distort both voting behavior (de Vries et al. 2011; Arnold 2012) and

public opinion (Anderson 1998; Karp et al. 2003; Clark and Hellwig 2012; Elenbaas et al. 2012; Tilman 2012). Essentially, the political positions and vote choices of individuals might shift if they had greater knowledge about the system. These results suggest, then, that low knowledge may undermine the functioning of democratic systems by distorting the representativeness of policy and political outcomes.

Any review of this literature would be incomplete without noting the methodological barriers to studying knowledge in a comparative context. There are problems with developing valid measures of political knowledge even when working in a single country (Mondak 2001), but in the comparative literature, the largest issue has been the lack of data allowing comparisons across countries. The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) has been the most reliable source of knowledge data from several countries but is hindered by a relative lack of consistent and reliable measurements across countries and over time. Despite this obstacle, a growing body of research continues to tackle questions related to political knowledge in a comparative context. ■

Research on the Role of Ideas in Comparative Politics

Martin B. Carstensen, Copenhagen Business School

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Announcements

Please send announcements of events, calls for papers, calls for nominations, etc. to Jeffrey Friedman, jeffrey.friedman1@gmail.com

Call for Proposed Papers: *Political Epistemology*

Ideas for essays, dialogue/discussion/debates, and other contributions for the next issue of the *Ideas, Knowledge, and Politics* publication should be sent to the editor, Jeffrey Friedman, jeffrey.friedman1@gmail.com.

Call for Nominations: Ideas, Knowledge, and Politics Best Book Award

This award recognizes the best recent book on empirical or normative aspects of the causal role of ideas or knowledge claims in politics or government. The committee is authorized to go back several years, at its discretion, and to make its own nominations as well as accepting nominations from others, including book authors. Nominated books published in 2021 or previous years should be sent to committee members with a note or email message specifying that the book is being nominated. If only one copy of the book is available, please communicate this to the chair of the committee. Authors are urged to follow up with publishers to be sure that books have been submitted. Publishers are urged to contact committee members for their current mailing addresses. Deadline for nominations: February 1, 2022. Please find committee members' contact information at the IKP website: <https://www.apsanet.org/section46>

Call for Nominations: Ideas, Knowledge, and Politics Best Paper Award

This award will recognize the APSA conference paper by a graduate student or post-doc, presented at an *Ideas, Knowledge, and Politics* panel at the 2021 annual meetings, that best explores the causal role of ideas or knowledge claims in politics or government. Nominations will be solicited from 2021 IKP panel chairs and discussants. The awards committee reserves the right to make no award.

Deadline for nominations: November 15, 2021.

Call for Papers: *Critical Review: A Journal of Politics and Society*

Critical Review, now concluding its 33rd year of publication, places special emphasis on epistemological and ideational research. In addition to publishing work by leading political theorists (Abizadeh, Bevir, Carens, Elster, Garsten, Kymlicka, Fishkin, Gillespie, Landemore, Lane, Lee, Ober, Patten, Pettit, Rosen, Shapiro, Smith, Stiliz, Taylor, Tuck, Tulis, Waldron, Wedeen, Yack, et al.) and empirically oriented political scientists (Achen, Bartels, Berman, Blyth, Carpenter, Converse, Feldman, Fiorina, Green, Huddy, Jarvis, Lenz, Mendelberg, Quirk, Schickler, Schmidt, Shapiro, Smith, Stokes, Tetlock, Zaller, et al.), it has served as an early-publication venue for many junior political theorists and political scientists. Please check the journal's website for submission information: www.criticalreview.com

Ideas, Knowledge, and Politics Awards to Date

Best Paper by a Graduate Student or Post-Doc Presented in an IKP-Sponsored APSA panel

2017

Kevin J. Elliott, Columbia University, "The Division of Epistemic Labor and Democratic Performance"

2018

Naomi Scheinerman, Yale University, "When the Left and Right Make Strange Bedfellows: Vaccinations and Democracy"

2019

Matthew Benjamin Cole, Harvard University
"Toward a Critical Theory of Technology: Power, Knowledge, and Elite Domination"

2020

Eli Scharlatt Davey, Princeton University
"Georg Lukács, Southwestern Neo-Kantianism, and the Problem of Historical Understanding"

Best Book Award

2018

Democratic Reason (Princeton University Press)
by Hélène Landemore, Yale University

2019

An Epistemic Theory of Democracy (Oxford University Press)
ed. Robert E. Goodin, Australian National University, and Kai Spiekermann, London School of Economics

2020

Political Uses of Expert Knowledge: Immigration Policy and Social Research (Cambridge University Press)
by Christina Boswell, University of Edinburgh

2021

Europe's Crisis of Legitimacy: Governing by Rules and Ruling by Numbers in the Eurozone (Oxford University Press)
by Vivien Schmidt, Boston University

Citation: Schmidt's subject is the Eurozone crisis, which revealed the fragility of the EU's technocratic institutions (which she pithily summarizes as suppliers of "policy without politics"). As Greece crept towards a default on its sovereign debts in 2010, the EU's principal decision-making bodies (the European Council, which consists of the various heads of EU member states, and the European Commission, which proposes and implements EU policy) imposed a rigid prescription of bridging loans and austerity requirements. However,

the effects of this rigidity were dire: financial market speculation over Greece's debts not only failed to recede, but spread to other peripheral economies. Meanwhile, political divisions within the EU intensified, and what had been a general apathy among EU citizens about the supranational body in many cases morphed into outright hostility. In response, Schmidt argues, EU leaders relaxed the policies that had catalyzed the crisis in its early years. However, despite apparently better policy outcomes, these leaders continued to profess their adherence to "neoliberal" orthodoxy. The moralized language of profligacy and prudence that they had employed in 2010 to justify their rigidity had itself become a constraint on their political agency. Thus, when they finally acknowledged their reinterpretations of their rules in 2015, the EU's figureheads appeared confused (if not dishonest) rather than victorious. Rather than settling the controversies surrounding the EU's constitutional and political basis, they had in fact exacerbated them. By setting out to save the euro (albeit from a seemingly negligible threat), they had imperiled it.

The political epistemologist will find much of value in Schmidt's thorough account. Her analysis is impressively ecumenical, drawing on political theory as well as economics, IR, and comparative politics. But, in common with her previous studies of the EU, Schmidt's main method is interpretive. The constraints established by the leading figures at the onset of the crisis (inter alia, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, ECB president Jean-Claude Trichet, and EC president José Manuel Barroso) were fundamentally discursive. Moreover, Schmidt does an excellent job of showing that the various conceptions of legitimacy to which these figures oriented themselves were entirely ideational—and thus intangible. Early in the crisis, policymakers may have thought that they were generating sufficiently good "outputs" that the lack of democratic "inputs" didn't matter. However, even when they did materialize, the "outputs" policymakers favored did not match those expected by voters. This led to changes in what Schmidt calls the "throughput" of the policy process—the ways in which policy is generated and citizens are, or are not, included. The bulk of Schmidt's account is addressed to these changes, which followed dramatic shifts in power and epistemic authority as economic conditions in the periphery deteriorated. Crucially, she shows that despite their apparently salutary effects, it is far from clear that these changes will

be sufficient to address the EU's lack of democratic (input) legitimacy. Despite the discursive churn, policymakers had not (before the pandemic, at least) relinquished the idea of rigid rules and numbers, even if the content of those rules and numbers had changed. There may be good reason for this: given the technocratic discourses and expectations baked into the EU's identity, any fundamental change might lead to more, not less conflict. Yet if elite ideas do not calibrate with those of ordinary voters, conflict may be unavoidable. Either way, Schmidt's analysis suggests, the EU's democratic crisis is nothing less than a crisis of ideas.

The committee would also like to acknowledge three other fine titles. John Matsusaka's *Let the People Rule* (Princeton University Press, 2020) is a study in the epistemology of institutional choice. Direct democracy, Matsusaka argues, has been misinterpreted by its critics: the populism seemingly revealed by issues such as Brexit is a result of an ideational disconnect between elites and ordinary voters, not the latter's epistemic incompetence. According to Matsusaka, if voters' suspicions are to be assuaged, and democracy's legitimacy secured, the people should be included by fair and inclusive referendum. The panel was also impressed by two books on neoliberalism: Alena Azmanova's *Capitalism on Edge* (Columbia University Press, 2020) and Benjamin McKean's *Disorienting Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2020). Azmanova and McKean both offer a similar message to Matsusaka's (and, after a fashion, Schmidt's): that the ideas that currently dominate international politics are dangerously out of step with those of ordinary people. However, where Azmanova offers a neo-Marxist diagnosis of neoliberalism (i.e., one external to the ideas of neoliberals themselves), McKean looks to the beliefs and practices of neoliberal agents to identify the source of, and solutions to, our contemporary malaise. Scholars of political theory, international politics, and political economy alike will find much to admire in all of these books.

—2021 IKP Book Award Committee

Paul Gunn, Goldsmith's, University of London

Hélène Landemore, Yale University

Adam Lerner, Royal Holloway, University of London