

Forthcoming, *Voicing Dissent*. Casey Rebecca Johnson (ed.). Routledge.

Epistemic Arrogance and the Value of Political Dissent

Michael Patrick Lynch

To realize the epistemic powers of democracy, citizens must follow norms that welcome or at least tolerate diversity and dissent, that recognize the equality of participants in discussion by giving all a respectful hearing, regardless of their social status, and that institute deliberation and reason-giving, rather than threats and insults, as the basis of their communication with one another.

---E. Anderson, "The Epistemology of Democracy"

I. Introduction

Dissent takes many forms: from marching down Pennsylvania Ave, to refusing to stand for the national anthem at a football game. But it can also take explicitly discursive forms, such as when we publicly voice our political disagreements in speeches, rallies, and on social media platforms.

It seems clear that voiced explicit disagreement—online and off—has political value; in democratic politics at least, its existence is typically taken as a (defeasible) sign of a healthy republic. But over and above its purely political value, disagreement can also increase our knowledge and bring to light truths of political importance. It has epistemic value, in short.

In this essay, I examine four different reasons for thinking that political dissent has epistemic value. The realization of this epistemic value hinges in part on what I'll loosely call the *epistemic environment*, or the environment in which individuals come to believe, reason, inquire, and debate. In particular, to the degree that our social practices encourage and even embody an attitude of epistemic arrogance, the epistemic value of dissent will be difficult to realize. Ironically, it is precisely then that dissent is most often needed.

II. Preliminary definitions

"Dissent," like all interesting and important philosophical words, is slippery. For purposes of this paper, I'll understand it as publically expressed criticism or disagreement directed at the (perceived) consensus view of a particular group, or a view under consideration for adoption by decision-makers, for the purposes of influencing belief and action relevant to that view.

Such a characterization is obviously meant to be inclusive, but it serves to distinguish dissent from other kinds of criticism we may wield in public discourse. Dissent is aimed, to put it bluntly, at those at least perceived to be powerful, whether that power results from a consensus view or brute political authority. Moreover, it is done with a particular intention. Criticism can be voiced for a variety of reasons—to intimidate, to express one's hostility to others or solidarity with kindred spirits. Dissent, while it might do any or all of these things, is meant to dissuade, persuade, or otherwise cause a change in a particular policy. And finally, it is publically voiced. Critical thought alone is not dissent in the sense intended here. Dissent is voiced or otherwise expressed in a manner that is at least meant for the consumption of others, whether or not it actually reaches their minds or hearts.

Nonetheless this definition leaves room, as is fitting, for a plethora of other distinctions. For one thing, the publicity condition is a matter of degree—my dissent to a departmental policy might only be voiced to a smattering of my colleagues or it might be shouted from the pages of a local newspaper. And dissent in the above sense could be either non-discursive (the upraised fist) or it can be explicitly discursive (as in a United States State Department "Memo of Dissent"). And it can happen in different realms. A scientist can dissent from the consensus view on a particular topic, a historian from her

professional association's views, and a citizen can dissent from his government policies or laws.

My focus in what follows will be on a particular kind of dissent: discursive political dissent (or DPD where we need an acronym), that is, argumentative dissent directed at influencing policy and policy-beliefs. By a policy-belief, I mean beliefs about which policies are in a public's best interest. And by argumentative or discursive, I mean dissent that expresses an argument, whether elliptically—as on a protest sign—or directly, by way of a speech, or pamphlet, or op-ed. We'll be interested in both particular acts of DPD as those just mentioned and in various institutional social practices that support, directly or indirectly, such acts, including those found in journalism, political parties, publishing, standards of academic freedom, and the law.

This is a familiar kind of dissent in liberal democracy. It is hardly the only kind, as non-discursive actions like work slow-downs or boycotts make clear. But it is the kind of dissent to which the question of epistemic value applies most frankly and obviously. For insofar as it is directed at getting people to see, that, e.g. the Trump administration's immigration policies are not in the nation's best interest, it can be sensibly asked whether, how, and in what way, dissent of this form can be epistemically, as well as politically, valuable.

We can distinguish two kinds of epistemic value. One kind is consequentialist. Something has epistemic value in this sense when it has good epistemic consequences, as when it increases our knowledge, or justified beliefs, or simply results in our believing more truths. The day-to-day practices of normal scientific inquiry are presumably epistemically valuable in this sense. Another kind of value is deontic. Something has epistemic value in this sense when it in some way contributes to our becoming more responsible epistemic agents or knowers—either by giving us more capacity to better perform as such agents, or as a constitutive element of responsible agency itself.

Perhaps the most basic reasons to think that acts of DPD have epistemic value are consequentialist in nature. We'll take a look at two such arguments next.

III. Two Initial Arguments

Let's begin with what I'll call the Millian Argument, which can be put like this:

Millian Argument: If there is dissent directed towards some policy P then our justification for thinking that P is in the public's interest will be defeated, sustained, or possibly even strengthened. In any case, it is likely that the stock of true beliefs increases, since justified beliefs are precisely those that are more likely to be true. Therefore, dissent has epistemic value.

The argument conceives of the epistemic value of dissent as emanating from its critical function. Roughly speaking, it conceives of the space of public discourse as a space of reasons, or more bluntly as (potentially) a rational discussion. Just as the give and take of reasons is meant to make our arguments better, to increase our evidence base, and to rule out some possibilities and get us to consider others, so dissent, the argument implies, can add to our stock of justified beliefs.

Simple as it is, there is merit in this argument. One value of public dissent—perhaps derived from the value of free speech in general, although the proponent of the Millian argument, despite its name, need not make that claim—is that it can act as a form of rational persuasion, as a way of laying out the evidence for thinking that a policy is flawed (Mill 1989). Indeed that is precisely why so many revolutionaries and political critics and dissidents—from Thomas Paine to Marx—have used the pamphlet, essay, letter, book, or blogpost to lay out their case against the policies of the powerful to those whom they hoped were still persuadable. The idea is that you can educate via the practices of dissent.

But of course as many of these authors would be the first to tell you, such practices often don't work because what we might call the epistemic environment is corrupted. The criticisms fall on deaf ears, or only on those ears already ringing with the trumpets of the cause. And, of course, we have assumed that the dissent is itself largely justified, informed, and on the right track, where in reality the percentage of political dissent that is accurate is roughly about the percentage of any criticism that is accurate. And while unjustified or ill-informed criticism can teach us that it is so—and so increase our knowledge, if only in the negative—the public must be capable of recognizing that fact. Otherwise they may be persuaded by a less than reasonable “argument by tweet.”

For all these reasons, the simple Millian argument, while it can help to justify some acts of DPD and the institutional social practices that support such acts, it cannot serve to justify all—even those we might intuitively think have some epistemic value. More importantly, in order to realize the good epistemic consequences of dissent forecast by this argument, one must be in a good epistemic environment.

Let's therefore turn to a very different reason for thinking that dissent can have epistemic value. Like the previous argument, this one also justifies dissent by way of good epistemic consequences. But unlike the previous argument, it begins by recognizing that epistemic environments are often less than ideal. In particular, this line of argument notes that information relevant to forming reasonable policy beliefs is typically not distributed evenly throughout the citizenry. This can be due to a number of factors: propaganda (Stanley 2015); fake news; unequal educational opportunities, or conditions of hermeneutical or testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007; Medina 2013). Precisely because of such factors, dissent can be of particular epistemic value (Anderson 2006). Consider, for example, a black woman who is frequently told by white people that she is exaggerating racist incidents or seeing bias where none exists, when in fact her experiences in this regard are perfectly veridical. In such a context, it is extremely epistemically valuable for her to stick to her convictions, including by participating in acts of DPD—simply because they provide information others should know.

Diversity of Information Argument: Public dissent can bring asymmetrically distributed but policy-relevant information to light. Such information can defeat or sustain our policy beliefs, and thus dissent that produces it can have epistemic value.

The Diversity of Information argument, in short, points to examples like the Black Lives Matter movement to note that dissent can have epistemic value even in corrupted epistemic environments. Nonetheless, and as with the Millian argument, such value can be presumably be best achieved only to the extent those environments are not completely corrupted. Where information suppression and epistemic injustice is pervasive and legally protected, for example, it will be very difficult for DPD dissent—as opposed to other forms of dissent—to have good epistemic consequences.

These two arguments don't show, of course, that acts of DPD necessarily increase *all things considered* epistemic value. That should not be surprising.

Helping someone across the street can have moral value without necessarily having all things considered moral value (for example, if one does so only to obtain a reward, or if the person you are helping is only crossing the street to harm someone else). What the arguments seem to show is that acts of DPD can have epistemic value. Nonetheless, the contingency of DPD's epistemic value means that in order to be realized, certain other conditions must be in place. The conditions we are interested in are those that must obtain if acts of dissent are to realize their value.

Clearly, legal protections of free assembly, speech, and a free press are vital. Moreover, each such protection arguably bears interesting and complicated relationships to both DPD and epistemic value generally (Goldman 1999). In what follows, however, I want to concentrate on a set of extra-legal conditions. That there are such conditions seems clear. As Dewey put it: "Merely legal guarantees of the civil liberties of free belief, free expression, free assembly are of little avail if in daily life freedom of communication, the give and take of ideas, facts, experiences, is choked by mutual suspicion, by abuse, by fear and hatred" (Dewey 1939).¹ To achieve a democratic common space of reasons—one where, in particular, dissenting voices can be heard—our basic attitudes towards each other, and ourselves, matter. It is clear that they must be attitudes conducive of some degree of mutual trust and at least not reflective of open hostility. Dewey's point is that they also must also be conducive of inquiry—attitudes that encourage us to actually participate in the give and take of reasons in a landscape of plural and conflicting opinions. The thought, in short, is this: if acts of DPD are going to realize at least many forms of epistemic value, the epistemic environment in which those acts are carried out should not encourage dogmatism, contempt, and close-minded dismissal of alternative viewpoints. That is, it should not encourage epistemic arrogance.

IV. Epistemic Arrogance

In order to defend this claim, let me first say what I take epistemic arrogance to be. Then I'll discuss why certain communicative practices encourage it and

¹ Also in John Dewey, (1981a). *Creative Democracy: The Task before Us*. In *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953, vol. 14: 1939–1941, Essays*, ed. J. A. Boydston, 224–30. Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press. p. 227-228.

therefore corrupt the epistemic environment in a way that blunts the epistemic value of dissent.

As I understand it, epistemic arrogance is a complex social-psychological attitude that contrasts with what is sometimes called open-mindedness and with what others have called intellectual humility (Christen et al. 2014; Church 2016; Tanesini 2016; Whitcomb et al. 2015).² Like other social attitudes, it is associated with certain characteristic behaviors and motivations. Thus, in order to appreciate its character, it can be helpful to illustrate various features of the attitude via example. Consider:

DOG M A T I C L I S T E N E R: You often have coffee with a colleague, and sometimes talk about politics. When you disagree, he does not interrupt, and he politely responds to the points you make. But he never changes his view or even admits that he might need to think of things from a different perspective. Over time you realize is not actively listening to you what you say. He is only waiting his turn to speak.

The Dogmatic Listener is civil, even pleasant, but he nonetheless displays a key feature of epistemic arrogance. He fails to be “aware of [his] fallibility as a believer, and to be willing to acknowledge the possibility that anytime [he] believes something, *it is possible that [he] is wrong*” (Riggs 2010: 180).

The phenomenon I’m calling epistemic arrogance, however, has other features. It extends beyond mere failures to recognize one’s fallibility. When people adopt the attitude of epistemic arrogance, they also fail to assign epistemic blame and credit appropriately. Two examples illustrate how this can occur:

B L A M E R: Your aunt is deeply biased on certain matters pertaining to race and class. As a result, she often rushes to judgment faster than the evidence warrants on issues on which such matters are relevant, resulting in mistakes. She is willing to change her views when

² “Intellectual humility”, as I understand it, is a technical term whose meaning and reference is still under negotiation within both philosophy and psychology. Like many other technical terms, it has been introduced in the hope of more perfectly picking out assorted phenomena only imperfectly picked out by ordinary language.

presented with reasonable arguments or evidence that she is mistaken about the subject, but she never admits those mistakes have to do with her own biases or limitations. She always insists the blame lies with someone else, who gave her wrong information.

MANSPLAINER: You are pressing a point on a professional acquaintance. He argues back at first, but eventually says, “oh yes, now I see that you are right,” and proceeds to lay out your point in his own terms, all the while insisting that he has discovered the “real” flaw in his earlier position.

BLAMER is not just unaware of her own biases; she is not attentive to the role they play in her cognition. Moreover, she assigns ultimate epistemic blame elsewhere; what she attributes to credulity is really due to racial bias. MANSPLAINER, on the other hand, is aware that he can be wrong, admits mistakes, and may even own that they are due to his own limitations. But he is (at least not in this case) willing to admit that his error was due to evidence supplied by someone else. Put differently, he is listening, maybe even learning; but he does not regard himself as learning from *you*. He sees his beliefs as being improved by his own genius, and improperly takes epistemic credit.

The attitude I’m calling epistemic arrogance can be roughly described as an unwillingness to regard your worldview (or some aspect of it) as capable of epistemic improvement from other people’s knowledge or experience. People who are epistemically arrogant are know-it-alls. That’s a motivating state—it motivates you to not only stop inquiring, but at its extremes, to brook no objection to your views. To be epistemically arrogant is to be dogmatic in the common sense of the term.

Epistemic arrogance is second personal (Darwall 2006).³ That’s because it is both a self-regarding and an other-regarding attitude.⁴ It is obviously self-regarding by being an orientation towards one’s own worldview. But it is

³ Note that treating epistemic arrogance as a second-personal attitude means it is not a trait. Traits are stable dispositional qualities of a person; unlike traits, attitudinal orientations need not be stable or even consistent.

⁴ For a related point about intellectual humility, see Maura Priest, “Intellectual Humility as an Interpersonal Virtue”. Forthcoming. Ergo.

other-regarding in that it is an attitude that, by definition, is towards that worldview's relation to other people. One can't adopt the attitude of epistemic arrogance on an island so to speak. It is essentially a way of regarding yourself in relation to others.

In this way it is analogous to contempt. Being contemptuous of religion, for example, means more than believing (or being disposed to believe) that any given religious belief is false. To be contemptuous in this way is to regard religious worldviews as being unworthy in certain respects, and to see those who have them as perhaps feeble-minded, or deluded, or both. To have contempt towards religion (or a political ideology, like Marxism) is to have a distinctive kind of negative orientation to forms of life that embody it.

Of course, you can be epistemically arrogant with regard to some aspects of your worldview and not others. Aspects are rough domains or pluralities of commitments, such as your religious, political, moral, epistemic, culinary, scientific, or yes, philosophical commitments. Aspects are not single beliefs or propositions. It is not an aspect of your particular worldview that you believe that two and two are four, nor is it something towards which one (typically) has an orientation, just as it is rare for someone to be contemptuous of just a single religious or political belief. It can happen, but more often, contempt spreads widely from commitment to commitment. The same is the case with epistemic arrogance.

V. Epistemic Arrogance and Epistemic Agency

Recall that we are interested here in the potential for acts of DPD to obtain epistemic value. Paradigms of such acts are speeches, press conferences, essays, pamphlets, blog-posts, and Twitter comments. How might epistemic arrogance undermine the potential for such acts to realize epistemic value?

Let's begin with the most obvious. Acts of DPD are attempts to change policy beliefs. They are typically expressions of an alternative viewpoint from the one(s) held by some institution or decision-maker. In most cases, however, they are not intended to directly change decision-makers' minds. In a democracy, acts of DPD are instead generally intended to have more indirect causal effects. An essay written in opposition to President Trump's immigration policies, for example, needn't be intended to change the President's mind or even be read by him. But it might be used to supply

relevant information to voters in a region where there is an upcoming Congressional election. Its intention is therefore both political and epistemic, but its target is not the decision-maker himself. It is often a wider public or publics who can indirectly influence policy. As a result, if the target public(s) are not receptive—if, for example, they are epistemically arrogant about the matter in question by refusing to consider evidence, or by being prone to shut down dissenting views—then the given act of DPD will be less prone to realize epistemic value of the sort promoted by either the Millian or the Diversity of information arguments.

Take the case of the Millian argument. It supports the idea that acts of DPD can supply politically relevant information and knowledge by either defeating evidence for believing that some policy is warranted, or sustaining or strengthening that evidence. Should, however, those encountering this act of dissent be epistemically arrogant with regard to the issue in question, they will, to that extent, be less receptive to alternative viewpoints. Thus, the dissenter's testimony and arguments will be less *epistemically* effective. Likewise with the Diversity of Information argument, as the reception of the Black Lives Matter movement amongst certain white populations would suggest. If a given majority public adopts an epistemically arrogant attitude towards a minority population's report of their experience, that will lower the likelihood that the minority's experience will be heard.

Protest movements, and the acts of DPD that tend to accompany them, are typically well aware of this problem, however. As both the gay rights and the civil rights movement demonstrate, dissent that fails to produce immediate or direct good epistemic consequences because of a corrupted epistemic environment can still indirectly change people's beliefs over time simply by making certain biases and limitations part of the national conversation. This in turn can have further downstream effects of the sort sometimes described as "consciousness raising." Arguably, being aware of the existence of certain prejudices and biases can, in some contexts, lead people to introspect and become more sensitive of their own biases. Hence it can indirectly lessen epistemic arrogance. We can put this down as a third reason for thinking that political dissent can have epistemic value.

Changing Attitudes Argument: Dissent can change commitments or attitudes. In particular, dissent can cause people and/or institutions to be aware of their own epistemic limitations and fallibility, and to be less dogmatic and intellectually arrogant. Being aware of one's

prejudices and biases has prima facie epistemic value; therefore political dissent can produce such value.

Still, whether or not any given act of DPD will be effective in changing attitudes can itself depend on the epistemic environment. As a number of recent researchers have argued, for example, our life online can itself promote epistemic arrogance in ways that can inhibit an exchange of political reasons. Much of what we know (or think we know) now we “Google-know,” in the sense that we acquire information online from websites and social media (Lynch 2016). The sheer availability of information, and its perceived reliability, has been argued to actually increase people’s confidence in their knowledge and make them think they know more than they do. Thus some researchers (Fisher et al. 2015) suggest that our ability to access expert opinion so easily and immediately online can cause us to “lose track of our own reliance on it and distorting how we view our own abilities” (Fisher et al. 2015: 675). This conclusion, also supported by recent work by Fernbach and Sloman (Fernbach et al. 2013; Sloman and Fernbach 2017), in turn indicates that we can over-estimate how much we individually know because “externally accessible information is conflated with knowledge ‘in the head’” (Fisher et al. 2015: 682). Some experiments, for example, show that searching for explanations on the Internet increases the likelihood that we think we know more than we do even about an unrelated topic—even controlling for factors such as content and time. The sheer accessibility of information itself can lead to increased epistemic arrogance. Of course we are right, we think—just Google it!

Our use of information technology also provides other barriers to our ability to inform others by way of political dissent. Our online life, particularly for those who use social media, is deeply personalized. The ads we see online and the news that comes across on our phones is the result of our own information curation and management. It is tailored to satisfy our preexisting preferences and political viewpoints. Moreover, and as some have noted (Lynch 2016; Sunstein 2009), our social lives online are increasingly polarized; we live in isolated information bubbles. To the extent that this is correct, it can blunt our ability to effectively dissent via social media. Plainly put, it is difficult to count sharing a Facebook post to one’s friends as an act of dissent at all if all of one’s friends share the same opinion. That’s venting, not dissenting.

Ironically, political dissent becomes even more important the more widespread epistemic arrogance becomes amongst decision-makers and the public at large—as the Changing Attitude argument indicates. Yet while there are numerous reasons to think that acts of DPD can fail to realize the good epistemic consequences they are meant to achieve, there remains a final kind of epistemic value in such dissent.

So far, we've concentrated on how acts of DPD done by an agent can lead to an increase in politically relevant knowledge *in others*. But an act of DPD can be something for which the *agent* too can receive credit, precisely because the dissent is being done to disseminate knowledge. Take a professional football player who speaks out at press conferences on the dangers and inequalities of police violence in his city. It is possible, as some might allege, that he is motivated to do so only because he wishes to gain press attention for himself. But if, as he contends (and is more likely the case), he is speaking out so that more people will come to know about such violence, then he is, to that extent, acting in an epistemically responsible manner. Extrapolating from such example, we can present a fourth argument, building on the other three.

Responsibility Argument: To the extent that you engage in acts of DPD in order to increase citizens' political knowledge, or make them more aware of their limitations, or to bring previously unappreciated politically relevant information to light, you perform an epistemically responsible act.

Acts of political dissent—even acts of discursive dissent—are generally acts of conviction and frequently of moral outrage. We engage in them to speak out for what we believe is important, just, or true. Such acts often take courage, and thus those who make them are generally deeply committed to the cause. I've taken it as given that they therefore can have political value. The above reflections suggest, moreover, that discursive public dissent can have real epistemic value. Yet paradoxically, these acts of speaking out for what we strongly believe can best realize that value only to the extent that they happen against a receptive epistemic background or environment—one which does not, in particular, encourage an attitude of epistemic arrogance. Publically voicing our convictions works best when our social practices encourage us to pay attention to one another and to not assume we know it all already. Yet even when that fails to be the case—and sadly, it often is—political dissent can be an expression of responsible epistemic agency.

References

- Anderson, Elizabeth (2006), 'The Epistemology of Democracy', *Episteme*, 3 (1-2), 8-22.
- Christen, Markus, Alfano, Mark, and Robinson, Brian (2014), 'The Semantic Neighborhood of Intellectual Humility', in Andreas Herzig and Emiliano Lorini (eds.), *Proceedings of the European Conference on Social Intelligence*, 40-49.
- Church, Ian M. (2016), 'The Doxastic Account of Intellectual Humility', *Logos and Episteme*, 7 (4), 413-33.
- Darwall, Stephen L (2006), *The second-person standpoint: Morality, respect, and accountability* (Harvard University Press).
- Dewey, J (1939), "'Creative democracy--The task before us," address given at a dinner in honour of John Dewey', *New York*, October, 20, 1939.
- Fernbach, Philip M, et al. (2013), 'Political extremism is supported by an illusion of understanding', *Psychological science*, 24 (6), 939-46.
- Fisher, Matthew, Goddu, Mariel K, and Keil, Frank C (2015), 'Searching for explanations: How the Internet inflates estimates of internal knowledge', *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 144 (3), 674-687.
- Fricker, Miranda (2007), *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing* (Oxford University Press).
- Goldman, Alvin I. (1999), *Knowledge in a social world* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Lynch, Michael P. (2016), *The Internet of Us: Knowing More and Understanding Less in the Age of Big Data* (New York: WW. Norton/Liveright).
- Medina, José (2013), *The epistemology of resistance: Gender and racial oppression, epistemic injustice, and the social imagination* (Oxford University Press).
- Mill, John Stuart (1989), 'On Liberty and other writings, ed. Stefan Collini', *Cambridge: Cambridge University Press*, 8, 15-22.
- Riggs, Wayne (2010), 'Open-mindedness', *Metaphilosophy*, 41 (1), 172-88.
- Sloman, Steven and Fernbach, Philip (2017), *The knowledge illusion: why we never think alone* (Penguin).
- Stanley, Jason (2015), *How Propaganda Works* (Princeton University Press).

Sunstein, Cass R (2009), *Republic. com 2.0* (Princeton University Press).

Tanesini, Alessandra (2016), 'Intellectual Humility as Attitude', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 94 (3).

Whitcomb, Dennis, et al. (2015), 'Intellectual Humility: Owning Our Limitations', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 91 (1).