**Teaching & Learning Guide for: The Epistemic Aims of Democracy**

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# ***Author’s Introduction***

In order to serve their citizens well, democracies must secure a number of epistemic goods. Take the truth, for example. If a democratic government wants to help its impoverished citizens improve their financial position, then elected officials will need to know what policies truly help those living in poverty. Because truth has such an important role in political decision-making, many defenders of democracy have highlighted the ways in which democratic procedures can lead to the truth. But there are also a number of other epistemic goods – goods like evidence, intellectual virtue, epistemic justice, and empathetic understanding – that democracies can benefit from producing as well. In this teaching and learning guide, I chart a course through the literature that considers the importance of truth, along with these other political goods, for the healthy functioning of democracies.

***Author Recommends:***

**Estlund, David. 2007. *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework.* Princeton University Press.**

Plato famously thought that democracy was a flawed form of government because it effectively turns over decision-making to the ignorant masses. In this book, David Estlund argues that democracy can actually lead to beneficial epistemic outcomes and that the legitimacy of democratic institutions partly depends on their ability to make good policy decisions. While there might be a collection of experts that know best, similar to Plato’s philosopher kings, there is no set of experts that are universally accepted by all reasonable points of view, making democracy the best combination of important human freedoms and effective decision-making.

**Goodin, Robert, and Kai Spiekermann. 2018. *An Epistemic Theory of Democracy*. Oxford University Press.**

Although Condorcet’s Jury Theorem has been widely discussed as providing a model for defending the epistemic benefits of democracy, many applications of the Theorem make use of assumptions that are rarely, if ever, fulfilled in real-world democratic societies. In this volume, Robert Goodin and Kai Spiekermann explore how the jury theorem approach might be modified to better reflect the conditions of realistic democracies.

**Landemore, Hélène. 2012. *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many*. Princeton University Press.**

It is tempting to think that the best way to solve our political problems is to simply rely on the judgment of experts. After all, experts are the most well-informed and are presumably better-positioned than the average citizen to weigh in on policy issues. In this book, Hélène Landemore argues that this tempting thought is mistaken. Relying on Lu Hong and Scott Page’s “diversity trumps ability” theorem, Landemore makes the case that a diverse group of problem solvers can outperform a homogenous group of experts, providing a potential reason to favor diverse democracies over limited forms of epistocracy.

**Farrelly, Colin. 2018. “Virtue Epistemology and the Democratic Life.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Virtue*. Edited by Nancy E. Snow. Oxford University Press: 841-858.**

In this chapter, Colin Farrelly develops a virtue-based defense of democracy, arguing that the democratic form of life offers a mode of existence conducive to forming and practicing the intellectual virtues constitutive of human flourishing.

**Baehr, Jason. 2019. “Intellectual Virtues, Civility, and Public Discourse.” In *Virtue and Voice: Habits of Mind for a Return to Civil Discourse.* Edited by Gregg Tenelshof and Evan Rosa.Abilene Christian University Press: 9-31.**

In this chapter, Jason Baehr applies work on virtue epistemology to the current state of public discourse. Emphasizing intellectual virtues like curiosity, attentiveness, open-mindedness, intellectual carefulness, and intellectual thoroughness, Baehr argues that virtue epistemology can both diagnose many of the flaws in how we interact with our political opponents as well as suggest a route to making political conversations healthier and more productive.

**Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice. Power and the Ethics of Knowing.* Oxford University Press.**

Much theorizing about justice is focused on inequalities of goods like opportunity, wealth, and political power, but this groundbreaking volume argues that there is a distinctively *epistemic* variety of justice and injustice. Epistemic injustices, which include both testimonial and hermeneutical injustices, harm people specifically in their capacities as knowers, revealing the damaging epistemic effects of discrimination and oppression.

**Medina, Jose. 2012. *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations.* Oxford University Press.**

Building on Miranda Fricker’s work on epistemic injustice, José Medina further develops an understanding of epistemic injustice meant to capture the challenges that knowers experience under various forms of marginalization and exclusion. He then proscribes practices of resistance that seek to remedy these challenges, encouraging us to develop a social imagination that allows us to be sensitized to the perspectives of the oppressed.

**Hannon, Michael. 2020. “Empathetic Understanding and Deliberative Democracy.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 101.3: 591-611.**

When defenders of democracy appeal to democratic deliberation, they often have in mind the role that deliberation plays in helping citizens discover the truth. In this paper, however, Michael Hannon argues that democratic deliberation can instead play a role in facilitating empathetic understanding, an epistemic good that doesn’t have truth as its primary goal.

**Goodin, Robert. 2003. *Reflective Democracy*. Oxford University Press.**

Democratic deliberation comes with many important benefits, including the development of empathetic understanding, but it is not always possible to access robust forms of political conversation and deliberation. In this book, Robert Goodin argues that it is possible to gain many of the benefits of democratic deliberation through the use of imagination. By putting ourselves in our opponent’s shoes, we can access some of the epistemic goods of the political process even when we are not able to engage directly with citizens with diverse viewpoints.

# ***Online Materials:***

**Christiano, Thomas and Sameer Bajaj. 2022. “Democracy” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by Edward N. Zalta. <**<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/democracy/#ProdRelaGoodLawsPoliEpisTheo>>

In this scholarly summary of philosophical research on democracy, epistemic defenses of democracy are discussed under the heading “The Production of Relatively Good Laws and Policies: Epistemic Theories”. The subsection considers arguments for democracy based on Condorcet’s Jury Theorem, cognitive diversity, and information sharing.

**Pynn, Geoff. 2023. “Must Voters Be Knowledgeable?” *Wireless Philosophy <***<https://youtu.be/trS1N82gMoU>>

This YouTube video produced by Wireless Philosophy considers whether there should be knowledge or education requirements for voting.

**Pynn, Geoff. 2023. “The Jury Theorem” *Wireless Philosophy***

<https://youtu.be/P4UbVyQPouM>

This YouTube video produced by Wireless Philosophy introduces Condorcet’s Jury Theorem along with how the theorem has been used to make a case for democracy from an epistemic point of view.

**Siscoe, Robert Weston. 2022. “Condorcet’s Jury Theorem and Democracy” *1,000 Word Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology* <**<https://1000wordphilosophy.com/2022/07/20/condorcets-jury-theorem/>>

An introductory explanation of how Condorcet’s Jury Theorem has been used to mount an epistemic argument for democracy along with some popular critiques.

**Political Epistemology Network Homepage**

< https://www.politicalepistemologynetwork.com/>

The Political Epistemology Network brings together scholars working at the intersection of cognitive psychology, epistemology, political philosophy, and political science to explore issues that fall under the banner of political epistemology, including many issues related to the epistemic aims of democracy.

***Sample Syllabus:***

**Week I: Introduction and Overview**

* Estlund, David, and Hélène Landemore. 2018. “The Epistemic Value of Democratic Deliberation.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*. Edited by André Bächtiger, John Dryzek, Jane Mansbridge, and Mark Warren. Oxford University Press: 113-131.
* Landemore, Hélène. 2012. “Chapter 3: A Selective Genealogy of the Epistemic Argument for Democracy.” In *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many*. Princeton University Press: 53-88.

**Week II: Truth - Condorcet’s Jury Theorem**

* Goodin, Robert, and Kai Spiekermann. 2018. “Part I: The Condorcet Jury Theorem.” *An Epistemic Theory of Democracy*. Oxford University Press.

**Week III: Truth - The Cognitive Diversity Argument**

* Landemore, Hélène. 2012. “Chapter 4: First Mechanism of Democratic Reason: Inclusive Deliberation.” In *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many*. Princeton University Press: 89-117.
* Landemore, Hélène. 2012. “Chapter 6: Second Mechanism of Democratic Reason: Majority Rule.” In *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many*. Princeton University Press: 145-184.

**Week IV: Evidence - The Pragmatist Approach to Democracy**

* Misak, Cheryl, and Robert Talisse. 2014. “Debate: Pragmatist Epistemology and Democratic Theory: A Reply to Eric MacGilvray.” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 22.3: 366-376.
* Misak, Cheryl, and Robert Talisse. 2021. “Pragmatism, Truth, and Democracy.” *Raisons Politiques* 81: 11-27.

**Week V: Intellectual Virtue – Human Flourishing**

* Farrelly, Colin. 2018. “Virtue Epistemology and the Democratic Life.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Virtue*. Edited by Nancy E. Snow. Oxford University Press: 841-858.
* Ober, Josiah. 2007. “Natural Capacities and Democracy as a Good-in-Itself." *Philosophical Studies* 132: 59-73.

**Week VI: Intellectual Virtue – Democracy & Epistemic Vice**

* Baehr, Jason. 2019. “Intellectual Virtues, Civility, and Public Discourse.” In *Virtue and Voice: Habits of Mind for a Return to Civil Discourse.* Edited by Gregg Tenelshof and Evan Rosa.Abilene Christian University Press: 9-31.
* Peterson, Gregory. 2022. “Intellectual Virtues, Epistemic Democracy, and the Wisdom of ‘the People’.” In *Engaging Populism: Democracy and the Intellectual Virtues.* Edited by Gregory Peterson, Michael Berhow, and George Tsakiridis. Palgrave Macmillan: 321-350.
* Tanesini, Alessandra. 2021. “Virtues and Vices in Public and Political Debates.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology*. Edited by Michael Hannon and Jeroen De Ridder. Routledge: 325-335.

**Week VII: Epistemic Justice – An Individual Virtue**

* Fricker, Miranda. 2007. “Chapter 1: Testimonial Injustice.” In *Epistemic Injustice. Power and the Ethics of Knowing.* New York: Oxford University Press: 9-29.
* Fricker, Miranda. 2007. “Chapter 7: Hermeneutical Injustice.” In *Epistemic Injustice. Power and the Ethics of Knowing.* New York: Oxford University Press: 147-175.
* Medina, Jose. 2012. “Chapter 1: Active Ignorance, Epistemic Others, and Epistemic Friction.” *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations*. Oxford University Press: 27-55.

**Week VIII: Epistemic Justice – An Institutional Virtue**

* Anderson, Elizabeth. 2012. “Epistemic Justice as a Virtue of Social Institutions.” *Social Epistemology* 26.2: 163-173.
* Bohman, James. 2012. “Domination, Epistemic Injustice and Republican Epistemology.” *Social Epistemology* 26.2: 175-187.
* Fricker, Miranda. 2013. “Epistemic Justice as a Condition of Political Freedom?” *Synthese* 190.7: 1317-1332.

**Week IX: Empathetic Understanding – Empirical Considerations**

* Morrell, Michael. 2010. “Chapter 4: Empathy in Deliberative Theory.” In *Empathy and Democracy: Feeling, Thinking, and Deliberation.* Penn State Press: 67-100.
* Morrell, Michael. 2010. “Chapter 5: Empathy’s Importance – The Empirical Evidence.” In *Empathy and Democracy: Feeling, Thinking, and Deliberation.* Penn State Press: 101-128.

**Week X: Empathetic Understanding – Applications to Deliberative Theory**

* Hannon, Michael. 2020. “Empathetic Understanding and Deliberative Democracy.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 101.3: 591-611.
* Goodin, Robert E. “Democratic Deliberation Within.” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 29.1 (2000): 81-109.

# ***Focus Questions***

1. How do arguments that democracy effectively tracks the truth, like Condorcet’s Jury Theorem and the Cognitive Diversity Argument, differ in their assumptions? Which one makes assumptions that more accurately characterize realistic democratic societies?
2. Is democracy unique in providing opportunities for developing and exercising the intellectual virtues, or can other political arrangements provide such opportunities just as well?
3. What should democratic institutions do to minimize epistemic injustice? Should their interventions apply only to their own institutional structures, or should they actively encourage a certain kind of character in their citizens?
4. To what extent is empathetic understanding necessary for a well-functioning democracy?
5. In your view, which epistemic good – truth, evidence, intellectual virtue, epistemic justice, or empathetic understanding – can be used to make the strongest case for democracy?