

DEMOCRACY AND IGNORANCE:
REPLY TO FRIEDMAN

ABSTRACT: *Several distinct epistemic states may be properly characterized as states of “ignorance.” It is not clear that the “public ignorance” on which Jeffrey Friedman bases his critique of social democracy is objectionable, because it is not evident which of these epistemic states is at issue. Moreover, few extant theories of democracy defend it on the grounds that it produces good outcomes, rather than because its procedures are just. And even the subcategory of democratic theories that focus on epistemic issues take the state of epistemic justification, not the condition of reaching the truth, to be the touchstone of democratic legitimacy.*

In his recent essay on “Popper, Weber, and Hayek: The Epistemology and Politics of Ignorance,” Jeffrey Friedman (2005) provides a rich discussion of many of the leading issues in contemporary empirically minded political theory. Ultimately, Friedman argues that the depth, nature, and prevalence of human ignorance subverts not only Popper’s optimistic vision of democratic “piecemeal social engineering” (2005, xxiii), but also recent appeals to “rational political discourse” (2005, xvi),

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and even the seemingly more hard-nosed approaches represented by rational- and public-choice theories.

Friedman argues that this subversion is due, in large measure, to the fact that ignorance is *pervasive*: it extends not only to the “man on the street” who participates in public-opinion polls and casts votes, but also to public officials, policy analysts, political theorists, and social scientists. Ignorance is pervasive, Friedman says, because our necessarily limited epistemic resources are not sufficient to capture inherently complex social phenomena accurately.

The picture Friedman presents will seem bleak to anyone who endorses a deliberative conception of democracy. The picture is even bleaker for those deliberativists who, like me, endorse an *epistemic* conception of deliberative democracy.

Although there is much in Friedman’s essay that is provocative and worthy of discussion, I shall in this comment focus on what I take to be one of Friedman’s major contentions: namely, that the fact of ignorance “has potentially fatal consequences both for rational political discourse and for rational policy making” (2005, xvi). My aim is to show that at least one epistemic version of normative deliberative democracy can survive Friedman’s ignorance-based objections. Whether this version of deliberative democracy is ultimately superior to Friedman’s own, descriptive view is a separate matter about which I shall have very little to say here.

Four Cases, and Three Types, of Ignorance

I begin with the concept of ignorance itself. I have argued previously in the pages of this journal (Talisso 2004) that public-ignorance findings admit of an ambiguity that owes to the multiple but closely related uses of the term *ignorance*. This ambiguity makes it unclear what the public-ignorance literature entails for democratic theory.

The crucial point for present purposes is that the term *ignorance* is used to characterize significantly different epistemic states. Consider the following four cases.

1. *Alfred*. Alfred has had no medical training, and no access to reliable sources of expert medical opinion, so he has no knowledge of the causes of some particular disease, X. Accordingly, when asked about the cause of X, Alfred correctly expresses his *lack* of belief with respect to X’s cause; that is, he *suspends judgment* about the cause of X, and, given

his lack of medical information, he is perhaps wise to do so. Yet it is nonetheless correct to say of Alfred that, at least with respect to the cause of X, he is *ignorant*.

2. *Barbara*. Unlike Alfred, Barbara has a belief about the cause of X. She thinks X is caused by smoking cigars. Let us stipulate that X is *not* caused by smoking cigars. So Barbara has a false belief; she is in this respect ignorant. But let us also stipulate that the view that smoking cigars causes X is not only false, but that it isn't even among the hypotheses recognized as viable by people with the relevant medical training and expertise, and that this fact is readily available to anyone who consults a medical professional or any popular health magazine—including Barbara. Let us suppose that Barbara believes that smoking cigars causes X despite what she reads, simply because she hates the smell of cigars. Accordingly, Barbara is ignorant in three senses: she has a false belief about what causes X; her belief about what causes X is unjustified; and her unjustified belief about what causes X was formed in an epistemically inappropriate way.

3. *Charlie*. Contrast Barbara with Charlie. Charlie believes that X is caused by eating meat. Let us stipulate, however, that whereas it is false that X is caused by eating meat, the hypothesis that X is caused by eating meat is a well-publicized claim that, according to most medical experts, has a lot going for it. We might imagine that Charlie formed his belief that eating meat causes X after doing amateur research that informed him about this expert consensus. In this case, Charlie has a false belief, and so is ignorant of the cause of X. However, Charlie's belief is to some extent *justified*, since he believes it because it is one of the hypotheses recognized as viable by people with the relevant medical expertise. This belief, although false, is not only justified, but was formed in an epistemically appropriate way.

4. *Donna* believes that X is caused by drinking alcohol. But let us stipulate that it is true that X is caused by drinking alcohol, and that the hypothesis that X is caused by drinking alcohol is among the hypotheses widely recognized as viable among medical professionals. Donna is in one sense *not* ignorant; she has a true belief about the cause of X. However, suppose that Donna formed her belief on the basis of the fact that the scientific name for X reminds her of the name of her favorite alcoholic beverage. Donna has a true belief about the cause of X, and the *belief* that X is caused by drinking alcohol is justified in the sense that it could be supported by the right kind of evidence, but nonetheless *she* is not justified in her belief; she is ignorant in the sense

that what she takes to be evidence for her (true) belief is, in fact, *not evidence*. She has formed her belief in an epistemically inappropriate way.

To be sure, I am glossing over many subtle distinctions that are central to epistemology; discussion of all the philosophically important nuances would take us far beyond our present purpose.¹ The relevant point to draw from these cases, however, is that the term *ignorance* is used in three distinct types of epistemic evaluation: (1) *truth evaluation*, (2) *justification evaluation*, and (3) *agent evaluation*.

When performing truth evaluations, we say of anyone who has a false belief that he is *ipso facto* ignorant to that extent; in this sense, ignorance is equivalent to believing what is false. None of us is omniscient, and we all hold false beliefs; we are all ignorant in this sense.

We may also say that someone is ignorant when he has an *unjustified* belief. To have an unjustified belief, we may say, is to have a belief that is not supported by the relevant kind of evidence. Insofar as we believe irrationally—that is, without justification—we are ignorant, whether or not our belief is false.

Third, we may say that someone is ignorant when he has not followed proper epistemic procedure in forming his belief. Someone who believes on the basis of prejudice or on the basis of the dictates of a Magic 8-Ball is ignorant in the sense that he is an *incompetent* or *vicious* epistemic agent, regardless of whether the 8-ball turns out to be “right.”

Turning to our cases, we would say of Barbara and Charlie that they are ignorant in the truth-evaluative sense. Barbara, but not Charlie, is ignorant in the remaining two senses as well: what she believes is not supported by any of the relevant evidence; and she formed her belief in a way that we take to be epistemically blameworthy, because one should not form beliefs about the cause of a disease in the way she has. Charlie, by contrast, believes something for which there is support by the relevant kind of evidence, and he formed his belief in a way that we take to be epistemically responsible; for this reason, he is above epistemic reproach, despite the fact that he is ignorant in the truth-evaluative sense. Donna has a true belief, and believes a proposition that is supported by the relevant kind of evidence, but is nonetheless ignorant because she formed her belief in the wrong way. Donna is an *irresponsible* epistemic agent who happens to have gotten lucky in this particular case; but her belief-forming *policy*—her *epistemic character*, if you will—is vicious and worthy of condemnation.

Hence we see that ignorance comes in many forms. We also see that not all instances of ignorance are instances of irrationality or stupidity;

some cases of ignorance are, like Alfred's and Charlie's, cases of epistemic responsibility.

The charge of ignorance in the truth-evaluative sense is more or less equivalent to the Popperian claim of fallibility emphasized by Friedman. We are ignorant in the truth-evaluative sense insofar as we have false beliefs; that is, we are all ignorant because none of us is omniscient. Nobody is in possession of the complete truth, and only the complete truth; ignorance in this sense is part of the human condition.

Popper, and many philosophers who preceded and followed him, was correct to insist that the way to cope with our tendency to false belief is to attend carefully to ways in which we *form* and *justify* beliefs. Though we are perhaps doomed to ignorance in the truth-evaluative sense, then, we may, like Charlie, avoid ignorance in the justification-evaluative and agent-evaluative senses. By doing so, we can hope to make some advance on our truth-evaluative ignorance. That is, in pursuing knowledge we are pursuing true beliefs; we pursue true beliefs by pursuing well-justified beliefs; in turn, we pursue well-justified beliefs by pursuing properly formed beliefs. In this way, the epistemic enterprise itself is an instance of "piecemeal engineering."

Which Ignorance?

So much for the distinctions and categories in which epistemologists take delight. The immediate payoff for this discussion lies in the fact that throughout his paper, Friedman conflates these different kinds of ignorance.

For instance, Friedman (2005, xiv) sometimes equates ignorance with lack of, or failure to acquire, knowledge, or with the fact that we often "don't know what we don't know"; but since we can fail to have knowledge in a number of ways (e.g., we can form false beliefs, form true but unjustified beliefs, or form no beliefs at all), this is to remain ambiguous with regard to the term *ignorance*. Elsewhere, he uses the term *ignorance* in the truth-evaluative sense, as when he criticizes various heuristics for being "fallacious" (ibid., xx). He also uses the term in its agent-evaluative sense when he refers to ignorant citizens as "ignoramuses" (ibid., xxiv). He also claims that ignorance consists in holding beliefs that are "baseless" (2005, xv); this is to use the term in its justification-evaluative sense. And when he extols the virtues of market "prices as proxies for knowledge" (ibid., xxxv), he implicitly denies that

failure of justification of the kind exemplified in the case of Donna is a kind of ignorance at all: for he implies that someone who has a true belief but no *justification* for it is *not* ignorant in any politically relevant sense.

Now, it seems to me to matter for democratic theory *which* kind of ignorance prevails. Charlie is ignorant in only the truth-evaluative sense; he is an epistemically responsible believer with a justified (but false) belief. The need to cope with this kind of ignorance seems to work in the democrat's favor. Through the kind of free exchange and open discourse that is central to democracy, Charlie will come to understand that his view is but one viable hypothesis on the matter, and that others who are equally well informed and epistemically responsible as he nonetheless disagree with his view. Of course, this is not to say that he will arrive at the truth about the cause of X; he may, after all, retain his belief and therefore remain ignorant, or exchange his belief for another false belief. But the engagement with intelligent opposition will engender in an epistemically responsible agent a kind of epistemic modesty, which in turn should engender a kind of political modesty.

Barbara, by contrast, embodies the kind of ignorance that seems most damaging to democracy: she is ignorant in all three senses, and so, in her present state, is unable to meet the conditions of responsible democratic citizenship. But questions emerge concerning the source of her agent-evaluative ignorance. Given our description of the basis of her belief about the cause of X, it is tempting to see Barbara as not only *ignorant*, but epistemically *incompetent* and perhaps *incorrigibly* so. Yet the fact that she believes something patently false on the basis of obviously foolish reasons does not force such a conclusion.

Put otherwise, although it is tempting to think that Barbara is unable to gain the epistemic benefits of Millian free discussion, such a conclusion is hasty. Barbara might not be epistemically beyond the pale, but simply wildly misinformed; and if she is misinformed rather than incompetent, the solution is to inform her. In order to inform her, all one would need is access to the data and ongoing disputes among medical professionals researching the cause of X. Again, it is not clear exactly where the threat to democracy lies.

In any case, I take it that it is crucial for political theorists concerned about ignorance in the real world to be able to tell the difference between Barbara and Charlie. But in order to do so, they would have to access information about citizens that is difficult to gather by means of opinion polling. The best way to tell the difference between Barbara-

citizens and Charlie-citizens would be to give subjects some kind of test, not an opinion poll. But this is impractical. So, as things stand, in order to get any definite conclusion with respect to democracy from the public-ignorance findings, political theorists and social scientists have to *interpret* their data by means of the kind of counterfactual analysis that Friedman (2005, xi) forecloses, because he urges that it is fraught with cognitive hazard.

Lest I be misunderstood as downplaying the problem of public ignorance, I applaud pro-democracy theorists who lament the problem and propose ways of alleviating it.² But it is not clear that public ignorance poses a “potentially lethal” objection to democracy. In order to get to the point of lethality, it would have to be shown that the great majority of ignorant citizens are like Barbara rather than Charlie, and irremediably so. But this is precisely the kind of conclusion that Friedman argues that social scientists are, for reasons of their own ignorance, unwarranted in drawing.

Locating the Target

Perhaps I have moved too quickly. Skeptical arguments such as Friedman’s have a funny way of confirming themselves. It is not uncommon in arguing against a skeptical thesis to find that the skeptic takes the success of one’s criticism of skepticism to confirm an even broader skeptical thesis. Friedman might respond to my argument above by saying that the fact that we cannot identify precisely the kind of ignorance that prevails is actually an indication of the *depth of our ignorance*, and, as such, provides further confirmation of his thesis. Friedman gives a hint of this possibility by arguing that ignorance in *many different senses* prevails among human beings. Friedman (2005, xxiii) writes:

What we find in the real world of social democracy is . . . a cacophony of confident voices that unwittingly express factual ignorance, theoretical ignorance, ignorance of logic, ignorance of their own possible ignorance, ignorance of their opponents’ possible ignorance. . . .

So let us take a step back and consider Friedman’s broader thesis about ignorance. The first thing to notice is that, even if it were true that ignorance in all of its forms is pervasive and insurmountable, it is not clear that this fact would pose, as Friedman (2005, x) alleges, a “po-

tentially lethal” objection to the “pro-democracy normative consensus in political science, in economics, and in our culture at large.” This is because the “pro-democracy consensus” to which Friedman refers is comprised in large measure of views that explicitly deny that epistemology is relevant to the justification or practice of democracy; that is, despite the recent turn in political philosophy to deliberative forms of democratic theory, most democrats in the academy and beyond hold that the superiority of democracy as a form of political association derives from its unique ability to satisfy some decidedly *moral* requirement, such as freedom, equality, reciprocity, dignity, or autonomy. Such views of democracy are untouched by considerations about ignorance (of any form) because they deny that the epistemic quality of democratic policy and decision matters for the question of democracy’s value. Of course, those who take a decidedly moral view of the justification of democracy could also lament, with Friedman, high levels of ignorance of various sorts and the increasing levels of incivility in contemporary democratic politics, but this would not cause them to wonder about the appropriateness of democracy as such; for them, democracy’s superiority is secured no matter how ignorant citizens might prove to be.

I take it, then, that Friedman’s target is narrower than the “pro-democracy normative consensus.” His aim is trained rather on the family of views that embrace the idea that public deliberation and rational discourse are essential to democratic legitimacy; that is, Friedman’s target is the kind of view first developed by the likes of Popper and John Dewey, and currently advocated under the banner of “deliberative democracy.” But even with the target narrowed in this way, it is not clear that democracy, meaning deliberative democratic theory, is much affected by the pervasiveness of human ignorance. Just as certain forms of nondeliberative democratic theory deny that democracy has anything to do with epistemology, many forms of deliberative democracy advocate deliberation for non-epistemic reasons. On such views, public deliberation is endorsed not for the sake of improving the epistemic quality of democratic outcomes or improving the epistemic condition of democratic citizens; rather, public deliberation is needed in order to satisfy certain moral requirements. This is, as I understand it, the essence of the influential version of deliberative democracy advocated by Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson (1996 and 2004). In their view, we should deliberate together because deliberation is the way fellow democratic citizens show that they respect one another. John Rawls (1996

and 1999) and those who follow him (e.g., Cohen 1997) take a similar view; many of the deliberativisms based in Rawlsian political liberalism are decidedly unconcerned with the epistemic quality of democratic outcomes.³ For in their view, citizens should deliberate in order to satisfy their duty of civility.

So Friedman's target must not be deliberative democracy or the commitment to public discourse as such; rather, it is those versions of deliberative democracy that advocate public deliberation for their epistemic properties. Let us call any version of deliberative democracy that satisfies this description *epistemic deliberativism*.

As I have mentioned, I am an advocate of a specific kind of epistemic deliberativism; however, I shall try to respond to Friedman in a way that I think is consistent with other versions of this kind of view.⁴

Ignorance and Epistemic Deliberativism

A few general points about epistemic deliberativism are worth making at the start.

Even epistemic deliberativists reject the view, possibly advocated by Rousseau, that epistemic correctness or truth is necessary and sufficient for the political legitimacy of a collective decision; that is, like most democratic theorists, epistemic deliberativists draw a distinction between outcomes that are true and those that are legitimate. According to epistemic deliberativists, even a *false* democratic outcome can be politically authoritative. So the fact of prevalent and possibly ineliminable truth-evaluative ignorance does not constitute a knock-down objection to epistemic deliberativism.

Although epistemic deliberativists such as I advocate public deliberation for its epistemic properties, we see the legitimacy of democracy as in part constituted by the epistemic properties of democratic *processes*. We reject the thought that incorrect *outcomes* are *ipso facto* politically illegitimate. For epistemic deliberativists, the processes of epistemic justification made possible by democratic arrangements, not the truth of the outcomes of those processes, are the source of democracy's legitimacy.

Of course, the epistemic value of democratic processes is derived from the epistemic value of the outcomes of those processes. This is a diachronic and comparative matter; that is, we judge democratic processes to be epistemically superior in the sense that they perform, on average, better than other available and morally permissible methods of

public collective decision. But, again, this evaluation of democracy's epistemic performance is focused not on the *truth* of its outcomes, but rather on the degree to which its outcomes tend to be *justified*; that is, we evaluate democracy in terms of its *truth-tracking* propensities. To insist that truth is necessary for legitimacy is to reject the central Popperian insight about ignorance; we cannot pursue truth except by pursuing justified belief. The central thesis of any epistemic deliberativism is that democracy is better on average than any of its competitors at arriving at epistemically justified outcomes.

And here we see how an epistemic deliberativist would engage with Friedman's positive "prices as proxies for knowledge" proposal. The epistemic deliberativist would argue either that the price-based view is not better than the epistemic one, or that it is not a morally permissible option. I cannot here do more than to sketch the ways in which these arguments may proceed.

The former kind of argument would run as follows: Markets cannot provide an adequate model for collective decision under public ignorance because in order for a market to serve as an adequate proxy for knowledge, we would have to be certain that the market in question was properly designed. For it is not *any* market arrangement that would provide the desired outcomes, but only those markets that were designed to satisfy certain normative requirements, such as *freedom* and *fairness*. Thus, in order to be confident that a given market was in fact serving its proxy function, we would have to know that it was functioning properly; moreover, we would have to know how to interpret the relevant normative requirements. Hence the original problem of ignorance simply re-emerges. The latter kind of argument would contend that democracy involves decisions that necessarily implicate normative issues which cannot be reduced to non-normative ones. That is to say, the "prices as proxies for knowledge" view presupposes that all political questions can be adequately stated in the language of the market.⁵ But this is *itself* a controversial normative claim, one to which many democratic citizens would object. The market model, then, would either have to justify itself in light of such objections (a conclusive justification would be difficult to produce, and in any case would reintroduce the problem of ignorance), or forego the attempt to justify itself and proceed *despite* citizens' objections (which would be immoral); so it seems that the market model may not be morally available to a democratic theorist.

But let us return to Friedman's critique. Friedman (2005, xii–xiii) expresses the heart of his criticism of epistemic deliberativism as follows:

It is utterly fantastic . . . to expect members of the general public to have theories about, say, the nature and causes of the diverse theories that motivate those we call “Islamist terrorists” that are sound enough to be adequate for making good policy judgments about how to respond to the terrorists' deeds. Yet this exactly what democracy expects citizens to do.

Perhaps it is true that *some* conceptions of democracy expect this truly fantastic degree of epistemic prowess of the general citizenry; and maybe Friedman is correct to see Popper's vision of social democracy as making such great demands. But every epistemic deliberativism with which I am familiar advocates a *representative* form of policy making, especially at the level of the state or nation. No epistemic deliberativist expects citizens to make policy judgments *directly*. Such judgments are to be made by governing bodies chosen by citizens, and presumably their judgments are to be made only after considerable efforts of information-gathering and analysis. Epistemic deliberativists hence recognize a division of epistemic labor. The more complex and far-reaching issues will be addressed through the mediation of representatives, whereas the more local will be addressed more directly.

Friedman will no doubt argue that the epistemic deliberativists' appeal to representative bodies is insufficient because the lesson of the public ignorance findings is that *everyone*—including the members of representative bodies and including panels of expert policy analysts—is deeply and incorrigibly ignorant. But it is not clear to me that such a reply cuts against epistemic deliberativism.

To see this, consider that classic deployments of the public-ignorance argument against democracy have been in the service of some version of political elitism. The thought driving such views is that since the *demos* is so ignorant, political power should be invested in an elite few who know better. Friedman rejects classical elitism, for he denies that there are elites in the relevant sense; again, according to Friedman, we are *all* horrifically ignorant. But even if we are all horrifically ignorant as individual epistemic agents, we might nonetheless be more likely to arrive at *better justified* beliefs if we operate under representative democratic arrangements than if we operated under any of democracy's viable competitors. Indeed, this is the thesis of much of Cass Sunstein's recent

work (Sunstein 2001, 2003, and 2006).⁶ If Sunstein's account is at least plausible, epistemic deliberativism is a viable option in democratic theory despite public ignorance, or even because of it.

Friedman may object that the public-ignorance data show that we *rarely, if ever* have justified beliefs about complex political policy issues. But were this true, then we are all, both individually and collectively, like Barbara and Donna: epistemically hapless gropers whose modest success depends purely on good luck.

Can this be true? Can it be that contemporary democracies and contemporary democratic citizens are epistemically no better than the likes of Barbara and Donna? It seems to me unlikely that things are as bad as this. The very fact that modern democracies continue to exist supports my impression. We would expect in the cases of Barbara and Donna that their lives would be very short indeed if they adopted universally the epistemic policy they employed in forming their beliefs about the cause of X; a society that employs collective decision-making policies that are epistemically equivalent to Barbara and Donna's should be similarly short lived. Yet democracy persists.

Ultimately, I am still unclear about the force of public-ignorance data with respect to democracy. As I have said, the public-ignorance data are certainly a cause for *concern* among democratic theorists who promote public deliberation; but the data do not by themselves pose an *objection* to deliberative democracy, even in its epistemic forms.

However, I think Friedman is right to resist the Popperian model of "piecemeal social engineering," if by that we mean, with Popper, that democratic governance should be a matter of continual trial-and-error policymaking in response to demands transmitted by way of a constant feedback loop between citizens and government. Friedman correctly emphasizes that the social world is too complex and individual perceptions of it too partial to warrant perpetual tinkering. Even the epistemic deliberativist niche of the "pro-democracy consensus" is not primarily Popperian, though, so I wonder if Friedman hasn't knocked down a straw man.

NOTES

1. For example, one may wonder whether it is ever appropriate to make a blind guess rather than suspend belief, and to what extent the answer to this question depends on assessments of non-epistemic context-specific features, such

as the risks involved in being mistaken, etc. One may also wonder whether expert testimony is sufficient for justification. Some epistemologists are suspicious of the very concept of justification, some prefer to instead talk about “warrant,” whereas others argue that justification is entirely superfluous because knowledge simply is true belief. As I have said, these are very deep and complicated issues. It should be emphasized, however, that these philosophical complications frustrate any easy inference from the public-ignorance data to an anti-democratic conclusion.

2. Ackerman and Fishkin’s (2004) “Deliberation Day” proposal is the most extravagant of these attempts. No democratic theorist *rejects* the public-ignorance findings; they tend to see them not as a lethal objection to democracy but a problem to be addressed within democracy.
3. A counterexample is David Estlund’s (1997) epistemic proceduralism.
4. See Talisie 2005 and forthcoming. See also Misak 2000, Estlund 1997 and forthcoming, and Sunstein 2003 and 2006.
5. See Sandel 1998; Held 2006, ch. 7; and Sunstein 2006, ch. 4 for arguments of this sort.
6. See also Surowiecki 2004.

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