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Cognitive Diversity or Cognitive Polarization? On Epistemic Democracy in a Post-Truth World

By

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1. Introduction

Pessimism over a democracy's ability to produce good outcomes is as longstanding as democracy itself. On one hand, democratic theorists consider democracy to be the only legitimate form of government on the basis that it alone promotes or safeguards intrinsic values like freedom, equality, and justice. On the other, the skepticism toward the ordinary citizen's cognitive capacities remains a perennial concern. As Brennan argues, "citizens are ignorant and misinformed about the basic facts. Their mistakes are systematic and their worldviews unsophisticated. They process information in deeply irrational ways" (Brennan 2021, 374). And indeed, even the most ardent supporters of democracy have to contend with fears of mob rule, tyranny of the majority, and so on. It is in this sense that some think "democracy is a right that the people do not really possess the competence to exercise" (Landemore 2013, 1).

Even so, a number of democratic theorists have also sought to defend democracy on epistemic grounds. Reminiscent of Aristotle's 'wisdom of the multitude' or Mill's 'marketplace of ideas', this is the argument that democracy is justified, not just because its procedures are egalitarian and fair, but that the "knowledge generated and aggregated by democratic procedures" leads to objectively good outcomes (Landemore 2021, 363). Weak versions of this argument need only to demonstrate that democracy "does better than random" while stronger versions endeavor to prove that democracy is "at least as good as, and occasionally better than, any alternative decision rule" (Landemore 2013, 8). Epistemic democrats may also have different ideas on the exact mechanism by which democracies exhibit epistemic properties, ranging from "judgment aggregation via majority rule" (e.g. Condorcet's Jury Theorem) to public deliberative processes, though many point to some combination rather than a single mechanism (Landemore 2021, 363). Finally, they may have varying levels of commitment to the idea of a "procedure-

independent standard of truth or correctness in politics"(Landemore 2021, 364). Amidst these differences, an epistemic argument for democracy necessarily defends the knowledge-aggregating properties of democratic processes and contests any claims that democracy is valuable *despite* the stupidity, ignorance, or irrationality of the regime.

One of the most prominent arguments for epistemic democracy is the one put forward by Hélène Landemore. On her account, democracy performs better than alternative forms of government because it maximizes a key factor in problem-solving and prediction: cognitive diversity. In essence, cognitive diversity—roughly "the difference between each of us in terms of the ways we see problems and make predictions about future outcomes, based on the different models we intuitively develop about the way the world works or should be interpreted"—allows a set of diverse individuals to outperform even a group of the smartest (but relatively homogenous) policymakers when it comes to the type of problem-solving that is characteristic of politics (Landemore 2022, 143). In Landemore's view, democracy, by being more inclusive and egalitarian, maximizes cognitive diversity and so is more likely to produce better outcomes.

To be sure, we have good reason to take this debate seriously. After all, the election of Trump and upset of Brexit only renewed our doubts about the 'wisdom of the crowd'. The varying success countries have had managing the Covid-19 pandemic is also a stark reminder that there are clearly better and worse political outcomes at stake. In other words, any theory of legitimate political authority cannot neglect instrumental concerns. As Estlund and Landemore put it, "procedural fairness and equality plausibly have some intrinsic value, but so do outcomes that are up for political decision...and they are not easily outweighed" (2018, 127). Hence, whether or not one feels compelled to reckon with a full-blown theory on epistemic democracy, *some* intuitive concern for the epistemic

capacities of democratic regimes undoubtedly demands our attention and we should afford due consideration to proposals that promise to improve these capacities.

These questions have only been made more pertinent by the so-called 'post-truth era'. Indeed, the problem of post-truth politics is a distinctly epistemic one. Recalling again Brexit and the election of Trump, we note that both political upsets were blamed, in large part, on the preponderance of fake news and general disregard for 'objective facts' in political discourse. All things considered, the role of lies and deception has never been foreign to politics. As Hannah Arendt poignantly notes, "no one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other" (1968, 227). And at first glance, post-truth—manifested in the irrelevance of facts in public discourse—does not seem to be all that different. Yet if post-truth is just the preponderance of lies in politics, do we actually need to be that concerned with it? After all, would truth not naturally emerge from the free competition of ideas in a Millian free marketplace of ideas or by something like Habermas' *unforced force of the best argument*? If post-truth is just about the misinformation brought on by lies, the epistemic democrat likely does not have much to worry about.[1] For this reason, my thesis seeks to evaluate the epistemic argument for democracy in relation to the pertinent issue of post-truth politics and its bearing on political disagreement.

I argue that post-truth goes beyond the use of deception in politics and, instead, reflects an overwhelmingly complex and uncertain informational environment compounded by a fundamental ambiguity around the criteria for the adjudication of

[1] Critics like Étienne Brown (2018) argue that misinformation poses a significant challenge to a *non-ideal* theory of epistemic democracy. While my paper focuses on the *ideal* of epistemic democracy, I also think it is reasonable to acknowledge that misinformation is a problem for democracy while maintaining that the solution is to be found in institutional or structural reform to the media and informational landscape rather than epistemic democracy. This is discussed in greater length in Section 4.1.

competing validity claims. Fundamentally, it reflects an epistemic disagreement over "what is known, who knows it, or how we know" (Lynch 2021, 245). As I will demonstrate, this is a level of disagreement that epistemic democracy is ill-equipped to resolve. For all that is said about cognitive diversity and the benefits it brings, theories of epistemic democracy take for granted a shared framework of epistemological norms that allow a democracy to easily adjudicate between competing *factual* claims in times of disagreement—such that the facts will necessarily emerge or speak for themselves. The post-truth problem suggests that this cannot be assumed or, at the very least, that the workings and assumptions of this epistemological framework should be properly articulated and evaluated.

In particular, the phenomenon of cognitive polarization, in which people embroiled in a deep disagreement blame the intractable nature of the disagreement on the opposing party's irrationality or immorality above and beyond the flaws in their reasoning, is the result of deep epistemic disagreements that are commonplace in post-truth politics. In the absence of a shared epistemological framework—that is, a shared set of underlying epistemic principles as to what makes for good evidence, who can be trusted, how to weigh different sources, etc.—people who find themselves in disagreements end up concluding that the other party is simply irrational, deluded, or beyond reason. This has significant implications for epistemic democracy as a whole. After all, it would seem that healthy and sustained deliberation between citizens requires that each sees and respects the other as equals—something that is impossible if, as some suspect, citizens simply see opposing parties to be completely beyond reason. Importantly, this is a type of cognitive diversity that seems to be epistemically harmful when it comes to democratic decision-making.

My argument proceeds in four sections. First, I present the epistemic case for democracy as a whole. Again, I focus on Landemore's adaptation which emphasizes the value of cognitive diversity in our idea of collective intelligence in political decision-making. Next, I examine the post-truth phenomenon and trace its roots to a fundamental problem of epistemic disagreement—that is, a "disagreement over what is known, who knows, or how we know it" (Lynch 2021, 245). A conflict on this level, as I will demonstrate, is something theories of epistemic democracy have thus far neglected. Indeed, more has to be said on what makes for accurate information, how we gather such information, who is capable of this, and so on. Finally, I consider some preliminary solutions as to how epistemic democrats may save their theory including a suggestion that even if this problem is an epistemic one, the solution may well be found somewhere else.

2. The Epistemic Case for Democracy

Epistemic arguments for democracy focus on the instrumental value of democratic institutions and processes and their truth-tracking properties. More specifically, they seek to make a case for democracies' "tendency to make good or correct decisions" according to some more-or-less objective standard (Estlund and Landemore 2018, 113). Here, two features of this theory require further explanation. First, what does it mean to speak of 'better' or 'worse' outcomes? Second, on what grounds can it be said that a democracy produces better solutions to political questions than, say, a group of the smartest policymakers? Concentrating on Landemore's adaptation and, more specifically, her picture of democratic deliberation, this section aims to outline the epistemic case for democracy and its answers to these two questions.

To the first question, Landemore points to the role of a procedure-independent standard of correctness by which we can assess democratic performance. Sometimes referred to in shorthand as 'truth', this standard of correctness seeks to tread the fine line between affirming pluralism and avoiding complete subjectivism. To the second question, Landemore argues that the maximization of cognitive diversity in a democracy allows it to produce epistemically-superior solutions. Here, it should be noted that though epistemic theories for democracy can differ in various aspects, most stand by the truth-tracking abilities of democracy and the value of diversity.[2] In this way, my critique, though focused on Landemore's theory, can be applicable to the theory of epistemic democracy as a whole.

2.1 A Procedure-Independent Standard of Correctness

Our intuitions that it is possible to speak of better or worse political decisions become clear when we consider the alternative. For instance, absent of instrumental considerations, a possible explanation for democracy's moral importance lies in the fairness of its procedures. In this scenario, democratic decision-making and its outcomes are "held to be legitimate without regard to any tendency to be correct by independent standards" as long as its members participate equally in the process (Estlund 1997, 178). Yet, if the fairness of the procedure alone accounts for its value, is it not easier, cheaper,

[2] For instance, Goodin and Spiekermann (2018) focus solely on voting rather than deliberation but agree that "there are plenty of important factual matters of major political consequence that can and should be tracked" (303) and that "diversity clearly has an epistemic contribution to make" (96). A relatively rare exception is found in certain forms of epistemic proceduralism that do not depend on or even deny a procedure-independent standard of correctness. For example, Peter (2013) argues that procedural conditions fostering mutual accountability between epistemic peers are sufficient to derive epistemic value where the standard of correctness is difficult to ascertain. Schwartzberg (2015) takes on a stronger stance in her attempt at a 'deflationary model' of epistemic democracy by rejecting this standard altogether. Even so, it is not clear to me that the features she preserves (respecting judgments of ordinary citizens and a focus on institutional design) are sufficient for an epistemic theory of democracy.

and just as effective to "flip a coin" whenever we need to make decisions (Estlund 2009, 6)? Obviously then, a democracy has value beyond the purported fairness of its procedures (hence, 'procedure-independent') and democratic procedures implicitly assume that the decisions made by people will be better than those produced from fair but random procedures.

Furthermore, our commitment to political reasoning and deliberation presupposes the possibility of having better or worse answers to at least some political questions, and that they can be known by us (Landemore 2017, 290). For if this were not the case, there would be little sense in reasoning about politics. In this manner, the possibility of assessing the quality of a political decision and asserting that it is 'right' or 'wrong', 'better' or 'worse' suggests a procedure-independent standard of validity made up of values that a society upholds. This is to say that there is a "standard distinct from the procedure itself" that can be used to evaluate the outcomes of decision-making (Landemore 2013, 210). Examples include justice, equity, harm avoidance, etc., though the exact values and configuration may differ. According to Landemore, this standard of correctness "will vary according to the question at hand, although some ends may be considered universally valid" (2013, 213).

Crucially, this procedure-independent standard of correctness must be one that avoids, on one hand, the difficulties of appealing to some transcendent conception of the good but, on the other, the dangers of allowing all values or claims to be of equal worth. In the first case, one worries that the endeavor to find a universal or absolutist standard is incompatible with democracy's affirmation of pluralism. In the second, one is concerned that the absence of any means of adjudication relegates all claims to be mere opinions or subjective preferences and can easily devolve into a dangerous relativism.

Given this, epistemic democrats typically appeal to some form of "non-universal, even inter-subjectively constructed objectivity" (Landemore 2018, 617).

How do democratic institutions figure out what this standard entails? For one, we might consider some values which are characteristic of a democracy to be a part of this standard, i.e. the affirmation of individual freedom, equality, right to participate in government, etc. While these are valued primarily for non-instrumental reasons, it also allows for the maximization of cognitive diversity which is indispensable to the epistemic argument at hand. Beyond that, Landemore suggests that "deliberative processes are *both and at the same time* about figuring out the procedure-independent standard of correctness by which we are going to assess policy options and about identifying the "better" policy option in terms of how well it meets this procedure-independent standard of correctness compared to other policy options" (Landemore 2018, 619; author's emphasis).

Curiously, this seems to suggest that the procedure-independent standard of correctness is, at least in part, constructed through the procedure of deliberation itself. This, as Landemore argues, allows for a certain degree of responsiveness to changing circumstances and contexts while remaining "sufficiently distinct from the procedure to count as a procedure-independent standard of correctness when it comes to aggregating judgments about the best policies" (Landemore 2018, 620). But what happens when there is a disagreement about what sort of values should constitute this standard of correctness? As I will demonstrate, this feature of Landemore's argument becomes problematic in the face of epistemic disagreements.

2.2 Cognitive Diversity

What makes a democracy epistemically more desirable than other regimes? Arguably, the key innovation of epistemic arguments for democracy is the emphasis on diversity in

making collective decision-making procedures "more likely to yield better solutions and predictions on political questions than less inclusive and less egalitarian decision-rules" (Landemore 2021, 364). Briefly, this is the argument that democratic processes do not simply aggregate the intelligence of individual voters but somehow make the collective "smarter than any individual within them" suggesting that collective decision-making procedures can be intelligent *even if* the average voter is far from so (Landemore 2013, 2). Here, diversity refers to how one's unique experiences, background, and even intelligence shape how one sees the world, interprets problems, and proposes solutions. Given the uncertainty and complexity revolving around political life and problems, the interplay of these perspectives expands the pool of available information, creates new possibilities, and ultimately produces better solutions than a less diverse group.

The idea that there is epistemic value to diversity in politics is not a new one. For one, Aristotle likened the 'wisdom of the multitude' to a dinner put together by many rather than one in that "the many, each of whom individually is not an excellent man, nevertheless may, when they have come together, be better than the few best people, not individually but collectively, just as dinners to which many contribute are better than dinners provided at one's expense" (Aristotle 2017). On this account, collective deliberation among many rather than one aids the pooling of "*each person's* knowledge, experience, judgment, and insight…whereas the one best man can rely only on his own individual resources" (Waldron 1995, 564). John Stuart Mill's 'marketplace of ideas' also advocates for the protection of epistemic diversity, particularly, in terms of contrary opinions, unpopular views, and even errors. Here, the claim is that it is through the free exchange of opinions, both correct and wrong, that we are able to identify the truth and/or refine our understanding of it (Mill 2015, 19).

While these ideas are intuitively appealing, it is not all that clear how such processes of deliberation and adjudication actually work. To this end, Landemore draws on the empirical findings of Hong and Page and their Diversity Trumps Ability Theorem for her argument. In modeling problem-solving agents, Hong and Page found that "a team of randomly selected agents outperforms a team comprised of the best-performing agents" (2004, 16385). They suggest that as the pool of problem-solvers at large increases, the best-performing agents necessarily become relatively similar in the way they "encode problems and attempt to solve them" (Hong and Page 2004, 16385). The best solution they can reach is, therefore, only slightly better than any one individual in the group. On the other hand, a diverse group's solutions will be better informed by and more responsive to a greater range of considerations and externalities. Their collaboration may also open up new possibilities that homogenous thinkers are less likely to think of. Landemore explains it in this way:

> This counterintuitive result can be made more comprehensible through the spatial metaphor of the passing of the baton between variously resourceful climbers on a rugged landscape. Whereas smart but homogenously thinking problem-solvers will tend to get stuck at high but local optima, the diverse group is more likely to have members guide each other from lower optima to the global one, because as a group of diverse individuals they explore more of the rugged landscape (2018, 121).

Politics, conceived as such, is an endeavor in collective problem-solving in which public deliberation, involving "the collective weighing of reasons with others, by communicating, arguing, debating, and persuading", serves as a key mechanism (Estlund and Landemore 2018, 113). This is because the process of deliberation among

citizens helps to expand our pool of information, filter good arguments from bad ones, open up new possibilities for action (what Landemore calls "synergies"), and calls on each to adjust their preferences or revise their views in response to what they learn about their interlocutors (Landemore 2021; Bohman 1997; Knight and Johnson 1997). Ultimately, deliberation aims at producing the 'correct' solution to the problem at hand—whether it is through unanimous consensus in an ideal scenario or by some 'stopping rule' like a majority vote (Landemore 2013, 8).

Importantly, *democratic* deliberation, and democratic decision-making as a whole, is epistemically beneficial (and superior to other forms of government) because it maximizes cognitive diversity. According to Landemore, if cognitive diversity is necessary for collective problem-solving, the more inclusive the deliberation, the more diverse it is likely to be and, therefore, "the smarter the solutions resulting from it should be" (Landemore 2013, 104). Here, Landemore appeals to what she calls the "law of large numbers" and the correlation she sees between more inclusive (therefore larger) deliberative groups and greater cognitive diversity. Thus, she draws upon Hong and Page's Diversity Trumps Ability Theorem but generalizes it to say that, in the context of politics, "Numbers Trumps Ability" (Landemore 2013, 104).

2.3 Underlying Assumptions

There are a few things to note about this argument. First, Landemore's theorem depends on four conditions: (1) The problem must be difficult enough "since we do not need a group to solve easy problems", (2) all problem solvers must be relatively smart "or not too dumb", (3) while problem solvers think differently, "the best solution must be obvious to all of them" when they come across it, and (4) the initial pool of problem solvers must be sufficiently large so that the team of randomly selected agents will be

more cognitively diverse than the group of best-performing problem solvers (Landemore 2013, 102–3). Furthermore, it is taken that all problem solvers have the same goal of finding the correct or accurate answer rather than pursuing other interests. While Landemore suggests that these conditions "are not utterly demanding", it is certainly not unreasonable to question this claim (Landemore 2013, 102). In particular, we may doubt the validity of the third condition. What allows diverse problem solvers to recognize the better solution from the worse and the best from the available alternatives? Do the facts 'speak for themselves'? In other words, the epistemic value of cognitive diversity in democracy seems to hold the underlying assumption that truth has a self-revealing nature that becomes apparent in the process of deliberation.

Furthermore, the emphasis on cognitive diversity demands the "respect and encouragement of cognitive differences" and a "constant conflict of points of views and arguments" (Landemore 2013, 233). Relatedly, if we hold that cognitive diversity rather than individual intelligence is to be valued, there is no reason to suggest that some views are better than others simply because of the intelligence or expertise of the speaker. This is because the unique perspectives or views that each provides make up some piece to the collective puzzle. This is especially so in earlier stages of the deliberative process where one is more concerned with expanding the pool of information rather than filtering good arguments from bad. While there may, in fact, be 'better' or 'worse' claims and more or less well-reasoned arguments, this has more to do with how we consider the given viewpoints rather than the participants themselves.

Again, the question is how the range of opinions and claims, some of which would naturally be incompatible, should be taken into account during the deliberative process. Here, Landemore seems to suggest that the procedure-independent standard of correctness serves as the criteria for adjudicating conflicting claims, asserting that it is in

terms of "how well it meets this procedure-independent standard of correctness" that one identifies the better solution (Landemore 2018, 619). Interestingly (but perhaps not surprisingly) Landemore's focus here is mainly on evaluating possible solutions in terms of policy options, and she takes for granted the mechanism's ability to adjudicate between factual claims. In fact, she suggests that "an epistemic argument for democracy *at least* makes sense for factual questions" (Landemore 2013, 215). In other words, any disagreements on this level are taken to be due to a lack of accurate information and the influence of cognitive biases (Landemore 2013, 214). Barring these problems, epistemic democracy takes questions of factual truth to be fairly straightforward.

While the epistemic case for democracy is a theoretically compelling one, much of the work in epistemic democracy thus far has been to develop a general framework outlining the epistemic properties of democratic deliberation and decision-making at large. While this big-picture approach was obviously necessary and has been highly productive, more focus can now be directed to more specific problems that plague democratic processes today. As the next section seeks to demonstrate, the problem of post-truth presses epistemic democracy on the nature of cognitive diversity and its bearing on democracy's purported ability to adjudicate between conflicting factual claims.

3. Post-Truth Politics and Cognitive Polarization

It seems that a deficit of truth is characteristic of our politics today. To be clear, few people with even the briefest sense of politics and its processes would claim that the relationship between truth and politics has ever been a harmonious one (Rosenfeld 2019). From Plato's

Noble Lie, Machiavelli's support for strategic duplicity, to the 'alternative facts' of the Trump administration, the truth has always been manufactured, obscured, or twisted for political purposes. Indeed, as Arendt puts it, "no one…has ever counted truthfulness among the political virtues" (1968, 227). And at first glance, post-truth—which we can take (for now) as the irrelevance of facts in public discourse—does not seem to be very different. Yet if post-truth is just the preponderance of lies in politics, do we actually need to be *that* concerned with it? After all, it seems as if concerns over fake news and political echo-chambers have now developed into greater fears that citizens are losing their grip on any shared view of reality entirely. It is this epistemic disagreement and the cognitive polarization that poses the biggest threat to epistemic democracy.

3.1 What Exactly is Post-Truth?

It would be beneficial for us to first clarify what exactly we mean by 'post-truth'. Fundamentally, 'post-truth' refers to the irrelevance of facts in public discourse. Still, this definition is not particularly enlightening for those who wish to tackle it. Why have facts become irrelevant? How are they so? What are the implications? Unfortunately, the term has been a victim of quite careless treatment from those who have sought to use it for political, sensationalistic, and even propagandistic purposes (Habgood-Coote 2019, 1034). Often used as a derogatory label to discredit one's opposition or to shut down dissent, 'post-truth' has become connotative of views accused to be false and, therefore, unworthy of our attention (Kalpokas 2019, 41–42). The dangers are not to be understated, as the term may grow to be trite, with its meaning diminished, such that we are left beating around the bush anytime we discuss this so-called 'truth-crisis'.

In mainstream media, 'post-truth' is typically used in association with political speech relating to 'spin', populist rhetoric, or even outright lies. In its earliest forms, such as in Tesich's criticism of the American public's indifference to the Bush Administration's Iran-Contra controversy, and Keyes's accusations of how "our ethical systems consider lying to be routine", 'post-truth' was used to refer to the growing nonchalance toward the blatant deception of citizens (Krasni 2020, 2–3). In particular, both were perturbed by what they perceived to be a societal problem of apathy towards the prevalence of lying. Later, it also came to play a significant role in the discourse over fake news. In 2016 and the immediate aftermath of Brexit and the election of Trump, 'post-truth' was crowned Oxford Dictionary's Word of the Year and became a mainstay in political discourse. Here, the term was defined as "denoting circumstances where objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Oxford Languages 2016).

The existing scholarship proposes various interpretations of 'post-truth'. In terms of a general condition, Parmar defines it as a state in which "practically anything may be said and taken seriously…regardless of its connection with reality" (2012, 4). Sim advocates a more specific view, arguing that "[p]ost-truth means establishing a worldview then refusing to back down from it, or accept any evidence that questions its rightness" (2019, 13). In what ways does post-truth manifest? Kozinets et al. point to the creation of "alternative facts and misrepresentations" (2020, 130) while Block provides a greater range of behaviors such as the propagation of esoteric truths, creative truths, lying, bullshit, and so on (2019, 70).

In the context of politics, Fish makes the case that 'post-truth' entails a disregard for the truthfulness of one's warnings, promises, and claims for the sake of political expediency (Landemore 2022, 143). From the consumption end, Forss and Magro argue

that this disregard for truthfulness stems from people's preference for "politicians that make them feel good, rather than the ones that present the most accurate facts" (2016, 14). Finally, MacMullen describes 'post-truth' as a cultural condition "in which popular beliefs about politically relevant empirical matters are either scarce or tightly correlated with partisan identity" (2020, 113). In this way, we observe that though the existing scholarship would likely agree that 'post-truth' is related to deceptive speech, each holds differing views on the scope of such activities, attitudes of audiences, and the motivations of actors.

3.2 Not the Death of Truth

In my view, while these perspectives each touch on some important aspects of how agents navigate or manipulate the concept of truth, they fail to fully encapsulate the meaning of the term. Beyond simply an acquiescence to the use of deception in politics, or the relegation of objective facts to a lesser status, the more insidious threat that the post-truth era presents—and perhaps what makes it distinct from lying or fake news—is an epistemic disagreement "over what is known, who knows, or how we know it" (Lynch 2021, 245). To borrow from Arendt, a lie "tears a hole in the fabric of factuality" but "makes no attempt to change the whole context" while a disregard for facts may be exercised in order to initiate a "complete rearrangement of the whole factual texture—the making of another reality" (Arendt 1968, 253). In contrast, the issue of epistemic disagreement, while not denying the existence of this fabric of reality, calls into question the methods by which we seek to come to know it and, consequently, the conclusions each reaches.

In other words, rather than an irrelevance of facts and evidence in political processes, the issue at hand is a deep distrust over the validity of information and, thus, intractable disagreements often on the level of basic facts. Consider populist rhetoric that shows little regard for fact in favor of 'just saying what everyone is thinking' or hyperpartisan media networks that seem to peddle their own versions of the news. In both cases, actors continue to appeal to some form of truth rather than doing away with the concept entirely. Indeed, populist leaders often claim to represent "the one right and true majority" whose authority lies not just in its numbers, but also in their purported moral and cultural supremacy (Urbinati 2019, 120). It is also telling that extremist media networks mimic the processes of news production and presentation, offering their claims as more accurate or truthful news against a corrupt media establishment (Gelfert 2021). Thus, it is not the case that individuals have now come to deny the importance, relevance, or existence of truth but rather that the institutions which have traditionally been the arbiter of epistemic authority (e.g. expert opinion, journalism, etc) are increasingly challenged and distrusted.

Schaffner and Luk's (2018) work on expressive responding is also helpful in highlighting this subtle difference. This is the idea that people often deliberately misreport their beliefs in favor of expressing their attitudes. As a result, what looks like disagreements over what is *obviously true or false* is actually a form of partisan cheerleading. Using the controversy over the relative size of Trump and Obama presidential inauguration crowds, they argue that the worrying trends of widespread misinformation can be attributed, at least in part, to the tendency of some to engage in expressive responding rather than a reflection of one's genuine (but misinformed) beliefs. To illustrate this, respondents were shown a pair of images, one being Trump's inauguration crowd in 2017 and Obama's in 2009. Asking respondents to identify

whether Photo A or B had more people as opposed to matching each picture to the corresponding inauguration event yielded more correct answers (Schaffner and Luks 2018). And although a certain percentage of Trump voters answered wrongly when asked which photo had more people, a much higher proportion of them answered wrongly when asked to match the corresponding photos to Trump and Obama's inauguration.

This shows that although some were still willing to bite the bullet to affirm the wrong answer even when it was "so clear and obvious to the respondents that nobody providing an honest response should answer incorrectly", most Trump voters did not deny the objective fact that Obama's inauguration crowd was larger (Schaffner and Luks 2018, 137). Moreover, Schaffner and Luks argue that those who answered incorrectly on the more straightforward question could still have done so as an act of expressive responding rather than a denial of the objective evidence before them—especially if they understood the context behind the question. To further complicate matters, the motivation behind expressive responding has been attributed, in part, to the respondent's judgment that their stance reflects a more relevant or meaningful truth. In general, it is difficult to parse the exact thought processes behind such behavior. Those who answered correctly might have thought that choosing the wrong photo was a way of supporting Trump, or they might have thought that the specific photo in question did not reflect the relevant truth (e.g. it was edited, it was not taken at the right time, there was other overriding evidence). In any case, the crux of the disagreement lies not in the denial of objective fact or truth but in a disagreement about what that fact or truth entails.

To be clear, I do not claim that the present post-truth crisis is solely caused by this epistemic disagreement. Indeed, the situation has been exacerbated by self-serving

actors that aim to cast doubt on the concept of truth as a whole. For instance, a political actor may purposefully prey on the doubts of the citizenry by arousing their suspicion, first over their opponent's claims, but also to steer them toward the belief "that all politicians are similarly unreliable" (MacMullen 2020, 109–10). In doing so, political actors with no interest in being epistemically responsible remove any potential advantage their counterparts may have in being more faithful to empirical conditions, and change the rules of the game in favor of a "contest of identities, ideologies, and entertainment" (MacMullen 2020, 110). We also observe instances of industry interests—fossil fuels, tobacco, pharmaceuticals, etc.—intentionally promoting "a picture of complete dissensus" over scientific evidence that threatens their revenue despite significant agreement among the scientific community (Sismondo 2017, 4–5). And surely there will be some voters who simply show little or no interest in matters of truth, regardless of whether they believe it exists.

Even so, the argument for epistemic democracy—at least as an ideal theory like Landemore's—assumes that citizens share the same motivation of promoting the common good. Recalling the underlying assumptions of the Diversity Trumps Ability theorem (Section 2.3), problem solvers must have the same goal of finding the correct or accurate answer rather than pursuing other more parochial interests. If so, the theory seems to preclude individuals from deliberately misinforming one another for the reasons stated above. Although there is good reason to doubt the feasibility of this assumption in the real world, the aim of my paper is to highlight a critical gap in the theory of epistemic democracy itself that threatens the epistemic potential of democratic processes even if we grant its conditions. In other words, the theory for epistemic democracy currently lacks the tools to settle conflicts arising from epistemic

disagreements and, hence, will not be able to yield epistemically beneficial outcomes even under ideal conditions.

In sum, for the majority who have at least some concern for truth, it is precisely due to this disagreement about what is known and who knows it that it seems that people disagree on the most basic facts or why some are so resistant to changing their minds even in the face of seemingly indisputable evidence. More accurately, individuals "do not share a common normative framework" of fundamental epistemic values or principles about "what good evidence is, how different sources ought to be weighed, who the experts are, etc." and, thus, come to different conclusions about what is known and who knows it (de Ridder 2021, 228). As Rosenfeld poignantly states, "post-truth is, at heart, a struggle over people as holders of epistemic authority and over their different methods of inquiry and proof in an intensely partisan era" (2019, 12).

3.3 Epistemic Disagreement & Cognitive Polarization

The threat that disagreements on this level pose to epistemic democracy is most clearly manifested in the phenomenon of cognitive polarization (Lynch 2021). This is the idea that people embroiled in a deep disagreement blame the intractable nature of the disagreement on the opposing party's irrationality or immorality above and beyond the flaws in their reasoning. It is not difficult to see how this might come about. Without an awareness of this deeper epistemic dispute, any seeming disagreement on 'basic facts' is simply chalked up to the irredeemable ignorance or irrationality of the opposing party. The result is that citizens no longer see each other as epistemic peers—that is, people who are roughly equally equipped with the capacities to come to the

right answer or, on the flip side, "someone who you take to be equally likely to make a mistake" (Peter 2016, 143).

Who is an epistemic peer? Suppose that Marie and Jane are working on a differential equation. Each tries to work out the question on their own but their answers turn out to be different. What should they do? If it turns out that Marie is a math teacher and Jane is her student, the fact that they have different answers should give Jane cause to reconsider her answer. However, if Marie and Jane are both students who tend to perform equally well in math classes, having different answers should lead both to re-check their work and the answers they get. These intuitions appeal to the issue of epistemic peerhood. In essence, a disagreement among peers should cause both sides to be less confident in their original beliefs and gives one cause to adjust their beliefs in the direction of the other party (Peter 2016). In other words, if I see someone as epistemically competent as me coming to a different conclusion on a certain issue, I should question the robustness or accuracy of my own conclusion. And even if (or precisely because) I do not understand why or how they came to that conclusion, this fact of epistemic peerhood alone should lead me to accord weight to their views and push me to adjust mine accordingly. In this regard, disagreement amounts to mistakes in the reasoning of one or both parties, the limited perspective each has, and so on.

In contrast, cognitive polarization is a situation where disagreement is—in this case, not unreasonably—attributed to some critical defects in the opposing party's epistemic competencies or moral positions. Given this, the opposing party is not seen as an epistemic peer and one is therefore entitled to discount their views in the event of any disagreement. Going back to the example, if Marie is a math teacher and Jane her student, she would be reasonable in believing that their different answers simply

amount to a mistake on Jane's part. With cognitive polarization, however, the suspicion is that each denies that the opposing party is an epistemic peer.

Suppose now that Marie and Jane are both students who were taught radically different ways to approach the question—so much so that each finds the other's method to be incomprehensible. Not only that, they are also unaware that there are other methods to solve the problem. Under such circumstances, if they each arrive at different answers and cannot understand the other's work, they may well conclude that the other is simply mistaken. Furthermore, if each tries to reason with the other using her own method and fails, she may simply conclude that the other is plain wrong and, worse, cannot be reasoned with.

To clarify, epistemic disagreements have to do with "derived but still relatively fundamental epistemic principles" (de Ridder 2021, 231). Most disputed principles are 'derived' because few would genuinely reject the most fundamental precepts of knowledge such as "sense perception, memory, induction, deduction, testimony", but 'relatively fundamental' since they pertain to the application of fundamental principles in the real world which "often involves judgment calls" that cannot be defended by independent reasons (de Ridder 2021, 231). Goldman makes a similar point, arguing that "members of epistemically diverse cultures to have objective justification for different beliefs about intellectual norms" (2010, 202). [3] Different communities endorse different epistemic systems and "try to guide or regulate their members' credence-forming habits" accordingly (Goldman 2010, 187).

[3] Goldman further suggests there is an important distinction between first and second-order justifiedness as a determinant of reasonability. The key point here is that even if there is an objectively correct framework of epistemic norms, people can reasonably—even if not correctly—accept a different framework as right. In that scenario, they would be second-order justified if they believe P based on one's reasonably-held framework E. In any case, second-order justifiedness "entitles an agent to a respectable level of non-culpability" and is indicative of their overall reasonableness (2010, 205). Unfortunately, the elegance of Goldman's compelling argument is not reflected here. See Goldman (2010) for more.

For instance, members of religious communities are taught that specific scriptures or teachers of those scriptures are to be trusted as a source on religious, moral, and historical events. On the other hand, those raised in scientific educational contexts are told to trust scientific researchers or research as a source to inform one's ideas about the world as it is. Here, it is important to note that the sheer depth and complexity of most information and the scarcity of cognitive and deliberative resources means that the typical person is highly dependent on the testimony of 'experts' and other sources whose veracity is largely taken for granted. As a result, Goldman argues that these members can be objectively justified "in believing that the norms so transmitted belong to a correct E[pistemic]-system" though it turns out that there are multiple and conflicting systems (2010, 198).[4]

In the case of cognitive polarization, however, one is not aware of or does not take into account the deeper epistemic disagreement at the heart of disputes over facts or claims. The result is that each side of the argument justifiably (at least based on their own epistemological framework) but detrimentally considers the other a non-peer. This is problematic for epistemic democracy because deliberation is effectively paralyzed if any disagreements are simply chalked up to the opposition's irrationality or immorality. De Ridder suggests that the absence of a shared normative frameworks "makes it difficult to say whether or not disputants are epistemic peers" (de Ridder 2021, 229). Indeed, the concept of epistemic peerhood ceases to be relevant because individuals who operate under different normative frameworks can have good reason to see those who do not share in it as epistemic inferiors. The creationist who appeals

[4] The question of whether there is indeed an objectively correct framework of epistemic norms is set aside for now but will be picked up in Section 4.3.

to the final authority of the Bible is justified, *under her epistemological framework*, to see the geologists who rely on the scientific method as irrational, and vice versa.

Some have also suggested that this unremitting talk about fake news and post-truth itself erodes one's trust in others even if people are, in fact, much less susceptible to fake news or prone to disregarding objective facts (Rini 2019; Lynch 2021; Edenberg 2021). For instance, if I think that misinformation is rampant among Trump voters, I am more likely to attribute any disagreements with them as a result of their being misled rather than anything substantive about the issue at hand. In other words, perceptions alone can shape how effective deliberation ends up being. Even further, appealing to a procedure-independent standard of correctness based on some sense of political cognitivism does not seem completely sufficient in resolving the dispute. Even if one has the same political values, if this disagreement comes down to a matter of facts and cannot be settled by appealing to a common epistemological framework, what is there to be done? What are the grounds to accept one framework over other competing ones?

4. The Problem for Epistemic Democracy: Cognitive Diversity or Cognitive Polarization?

Can democracy still yield its epistemic benefits if we have lost our grip on any shared reality? If we understand post-truth as the consequence of deep but neglected epistemic disagreements rather than a disavowal or disregard for truth, it would appear that the epistemic democracy (at least as it is now) is wholly unprepared to settle any disagreements about basic factual claims—much less to come to a choice on the political

questions that depend on those claims. More specifically, the case for epistemic democracy is premised on the value of maximizing cognitive diversity but fails to recognize that having different epistemological frameworks—arguably also a form of cognitive diversity—is epistemically harmful. As I will argue, this is based on the faulty assumption about the self-revealing nature of truth and further reveals the inability of the procedure-independent standard of correctness to adjudicate disagreements on this level.

4.1 Misinformation & Disregard for Truth

Setting aside this paper's conception of post-truth for a moment, it may be helpful to consider the more common views on post-truth's effects on democracy and how epistemic democrats may respond. For one, talk about post-truth often goes hand in hand with the problem of fake news. After all, it is because of the irrelevance of objective facts that fake news is able to take hold in so many people's minds. Hence, post-truth, at the very least, entails that citizens are systematically and chronically misinformed about even the most basic facts—so much so that they are not able to form accurate beliefs and participate effectively in democratic decision-making (Brown 2018). To be sure, the sheer volume and speed at which fake news proliferates is worrying.

Though this is certainly not an insignificant problem, it does not necessarily speak to the theory of epistemic democracy itself. First, epistemic democrats can agree with this assessment of the informational environment and the misinformation of citizens while maintaining that the solution is to be found in structural or institutional reform rather than the epistemic democracy itself (Landemore 2013, 37). Even further, they may suggest

that this problem is relatively tractable since reforms are already underway and that epistemic norms of responsible media consumption can adapt accordingly.[5] Most importantly, the process of democratic deliberation perhaps only requires that *not all* participants are misinformed for the best solution or claim will be recognized by all once it is deliberated over. In other words, factual knowledge is not the only measure of epistemic competence, especially in terms of collective intelligence.

At worst, post-truth is said to reflect a complete disregard for facts and evidence, as though covering one's eyes and ears to information and fashioning the world as they please (Campbell 2011). In this sense, there is little point in deliberation as truth is completely illusory and any claim only amounts to an opinion. As mentioned in the previous section, this scenario, though more serious, is exaggerated. Most agents continue to appeal to or believe in some form of truth in ways that are fairly reasonable or justifiable. And for the majority of participants in deliberation who remain committed to truth, the theory of epistemic democracy seems to take for granted that the correct answer or best solution becomes apparent through the exchange of viewpoints in deliberation. Put simply, the question is *when* not *if* the triumph of truth will become manifest.

4.2 Cognitive Diversity or Cognitive Polarization?

[5] For example, the confusion over norms of communication on Twitter used to include the question of whether a 'retweet' amounts to an endorsement of the original tweet's claims. This is because one may retweet a fake story for the sake of facilitating further discussion but may inadvertently ascribe greater credibility to the original claim if this is mistaken by others as an endorsement, thereby contributing to greater misinformation. In response, Twitter created a new feature of 'quote-retweets' such that users have now developed clearer norms for interaction where a 'retweet' is more clearly an endorsement while a 'quote-retweet' implies further discussion (and often a challenge). The larger claim here is that social media platforms remain at a relatively nascent stage of development and that some of these unstable or disputed norms relating to one's activity on those platforms will be resolved with time.

However, the issue of epistemic disagreement shows that this assumption about the self-revealing nature of truth is in itself dependent on the citizens sharing a common framework of epistemological norms. As de Ridder makes clear, disagreements about relatively fundamental epistemic principles—"different underlying views and commitments about what good evidence is, how different sources ought to be weighed, who the experts are, etc."—can be reasonable but impossible to resolve (de Ridder 2021, 228). In particular, this suggests a significant oversight of the theory of epistemic democracy and its conceptualization of cognitive diversity. Namely, citizens' different epistemic principles appear to be a form of cognitive diversity that epistemic democracy supposedly values but is, in fact, harmful to deliberation.

It should be emphasized again that cognitive diversity is not an all-encompassing concept for the differences that citizens may have. To be sure, Landemore suggests that a diversity of "fundamental goals or values" is epistemically harmful (Landemore 2022, 143). In other words, all participants in a deliberation should have the same goal of finding the correct or accurate answer rather than pursuing other strategic interests. *Cognitive* diversity only pertains to "the difference between each one of us in terms of the ways we see problems and make predictions about future outcomes, based on the different models we intuitively develop about the way the world works or should be interpreted" (Landemore 2022, 144). Even so, the differences in epistemological principles seem compatible with this picture of cognitive diversity. For instance, de Ridder suggests that "given one's upbringing, education, and social environment, it makes perfect sense that different people will trust different experts, attach different weight to scientific evidence, or trust common sense to differing degrees" (2021, 232)—a sentiment that echoes Landemore's explanation for cognitive diversity.

Thus, individuals can certainly both be concerned with describing the state of affairs accurately but disagree on the types of sources or evidence that help accomplish this. Yet, if we take differences in underlying epistemic commitments to be part of cognitive diversity that is valued or protected, how should we adjudicate between conflicting factual claims and the political disagreements they bear on? Does the fact that there is an overwhelming scientific consensus on anthropogenic climate change or evolutionary theory change things for someone who rejects the primacy of scientific knowledge or the materialist focus of the modern scientific tradition? What about those who disagree about the safety of vaccines based on testimony from experts versus testimony from friends and family?

Here, we may instinctively think *systematic scientific evidence is obviously more reliable than anecdotal evidence from those around us* or something to this effect. However, the issue is precisely that one party's idea about measuring the robustness or reliability of information differs too—even if all will likely agree that reliable information is necessary. Put simply, pointing to statistical confidence levels, clinical trials, and so on does not resolve the issue if communities hold epistemic norms that assign low credence to scientific sources. Again, de Ridder emphasizes that people can employ different epistemic principles and "be fully rational in doing so" (2021, 233). The impasse that this brings about is surely not very beneficial for democratic decision-making.

Even further, how do we avoid a descent into cognitive polarization? Note, for instance, how easy or instinctive it may be to say that one answer is *obviously* the right one. Setting aside the question of whether there indeed is an objectively correct framework of epistemic norms, it suffices to say that one can be reasonable or rational in adhering to different frameworks. Yet, our tendency is to conclude that the opposing

party is simply irrational or completely deluded. Even further, the idea of epistemic peerhood suggests that it is perhaps justifiable to do so. The result is that deliberation does not go very far once opposing views based on fundamentally different epistemic frameworks arise. Cognitive polarization, which affects how we think about one another, will naturally also encourage other forms of polarization such as practical polarization, which has to do with how we treat one another (de Ridder 2021, 234). If I deem someone to be plainly irrational, I may discount their viewpoints or exclude them entirely from the particular conversation.

To simply say, as Landemore does, that cognitive diversity should be protected and nurtured is not to go very far when individuals are cognitively polarized. Leaning again on the concept of epistemic peerhood, I uphold the value of cognitive diversity when I affirm that someone is my epistemic peer despite differences in some regard because I see that these differences have to do with the configuration or type of epistemic competence. Under cognitive polarization, however, I see potential differences as an upshot of varying *levels* rather than *types* of epistemic competence. In this way, the respect for cognitive diversity is not sufficient to overcome the problem of cognitive polarization.

4.3 What of the Procedure-Independent Standard of Correctness?

Not only does the conception of cognitive diversity fail to account for the diversity in epistemic frameworks and its potentially detrimental effect on democratic decision-making, but it also does not appear that epistemic democracy can even adjudicate between the conflicting claims that arise from this diversity. And indeed, the procedure-independent standard of correctness, which supposedly can be posited for

factual questions, takes for granted a specific epistemological framework that largely remains unarticulated (apart from the occasional calls to 'believe the science', etc.). Without making explicit and justifying the type of epistemic values this procedure-independent standard upholds, epistemic democracy is ill-equipped to handle the disagreements over facts and fact-sensitive policy options that it is concerned with.

Recalling the discussion in Section 2.1, the procedure-independent standard of correctness typically appeals to some form of "non-universal, even inter-subjectively constructed objectivity" and is, at least in part, constructed through the procedure of deliberation itself (Landemore 2018, 617–19). Ideally, citizens come to an agreement about what sort of values constitute this standard of correctness and, in subsequent deliberations, adjudicate between competing claims in terms of how well each coheres with that standard. To be sure, the matter of competing *factual* claims is clearly not too much of a concern to Landemore who believes that the answer becomes clear "when enough accurate information is gathered, and when people make an effort to overcome those cognitive biases that make them blind to the available evidence" (2013, 214). The preceding discussion should hopefully show why this is problematic. Briefly, individuals can have different conceptions of what makes for 'accurate information' based on the varying epistemic principles they hold and they do so reasonably rather than biasedly.

What happens when there is a disagreement about the sort of epistemic values that should constitute this standard of correctness? Though there will certainly be some overlap—it is difficult to reasonably disavow the importance of reliability or accuracy—there can still be intractable disagreements about the specific tenets that make up these values. At this point, one may ask if disagreements here are really intractable. In other words, will the pursuit of 'reliability' not provide enough common ground? Here, de

Ridder emphasizes that epistemic principles derived from these fundamental values "often involve judgment calls and sometimes there may be more than one way of making these calls reasonably" (2021, 231). Here, Landemore's claim that the standard of correctness is itself partly negotiated through deliberation seems unfeasible. This amounts to saying that one needs the standard to adjudicate between different claims about fundamental values but these competing claims have to first be settled to get to this standard.

A possibility here is that the standard of correctness takes a certain epistemological framework to be given rather than leaving it to democratic deliberation. This, though plausible, would require that whatever choice is made explicit and justified in order to tackle cognitive polarization, and that an account of how to treat those who continue to commit to other epistemological frameworks is provided. Regardless, the point here is simply that the theory of epistemic democracy is unable to resolve the problem of epistemic disagreement behind post-truth politics. As de Ridder poignantly sums up, these "disagreements undermine a crucial presupposition of epistemic democracy, to wit the availability of common ground for reasonable debate" and prevent us from harnessing the epistemic benefits of democratic processes (de Ridder 2021, 226). In this way, cognitive diversity easily devolves into a cognitive polarization that cannot be settled by appealing to a procedure-independent standard of correctness.

5. Some Preliminary Solutions

It may be helpful to provide a preliminary sketch of the epistemological commitments this standard of correctness can take on. Whatever form it takes, it seems necessary to affirm the diversity of questions individuals may be concerned with, the various

methods they may take on to answer them, and the numerous perspectives in which one sees the world. This also requires an acknowledgment of the limitations of each way of knowing and the fundamental incompleteness of any account of reality it seeks to provide. To this end, Jeremy Elkins's (2012) account of institutional truth-practices seems promising. Following Elkins, we may affirm that political institutions need not aim at resolving first-order questions of truth about "what the universe is actually like" or "how things are" (2012, 44). Rather, the goal of democratic processes is to answer second-order questions of "how to go about trying to give an accurate account of how things are in light of the institution's particular aims and traditions and constraints", which also entails acknowledging the existing constraints on our information and knowledge about how things really are (Elkins 2012, 46).

This seems to advocate a particular form of pluralism, not just about political values as we typically are concerned with, but on fundamental epistemic values and principles as well. Perhaps the standard of correctness can affirm the priority of verifiability in politics given its public nature and the need for accountability. Although this does seem to have the effect of adopting the epistemic framework of the modern scientific tradition, it takes care not to do so in order to take a position on other views. As an illustration, Elkins considers the question of whether schools should teach the religious and philosophical claims about the origin of complex life along with the scientific consensus. He suggests that "respect for pluralism of opinion does not require official institutions to refrain from adopting or endorsing scientific truth-practices and accounts that happen to conflict with religious or philosophical views, but instead requires those institutions to act without consideration of the impact on those views" (Elkins 2012, 45–46). While we are more concerned with a meta-question on epistemic

principles rather than the truth-claims they may produce, a similar approach may be productive.

It should be noted that the problem of post-truth and polarization is very much a complex and multi-faceted one. In particular, cognitive polarization may be intertwined with other forms and causes of political polarization. What this means is that other non-epistemic factors may also create high levels of distrust or animosity towards members of opposing groups which can, in turn, exacerbate one's sentiment that they are less epistemically competent. As a result, theorists like Elizabeth Edenberg (2021) suggest that the solution is moral rather than epistemic. To Edenberg, the sole focus on someone's epistemic competence or credentials in this currently polarized society will inevitably backfire, especially when we still lack a common standard for adjudicating epistemic disagreements. Rather, she proposes that we focus on cultivating empathy, mutual understanding, and moral respect for one another based on shared non-epistemic values in order to first tackle the manifestations of cognitive polarization before dealing with the root cause which is epistemic disagreement.

6. Conclusion

This paper has sought to demonstrate that an epistemic argument for democracy, though promising, remains underdeveloped in its capacities for dealing with deep and intractable disagreements in the real world. In particular, it overlooks the critical problem of epistemic disagreement—namely, conflicts over fundamental principles as to what makes for good evidence, who can be trusted, how to weigh different sources, etc.—which is at the roots of post-truth politics today. In this regard, a closer examination of epistemic democracy reveals that its conceptions of cognitive diversity

and its procedure-independent standard of correctness both mistakenly assume a shared epistemological framework. Without addressing this oversight, the epistemic democrat will find that collective decision-making processes quickly become paralyzed—sometimes over the most basic factual claims—and unable to yield the epistemic benefits it promises.

Still, the epistemic democrat should not be too discouraged. Though this oversight critically undermines key elements of the theory, it does not do so fatally. The work for epistemic democracy is, hence, to recognize and take into account the ramifications of disagreements on this level so as to incorporate them into the theory. To this end, this paper hopefully provides a promising way forward.

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