

# What's so Good about a Wise and Knowledgeable Public?

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**Abstract** Philosophers have been concerned for some time with the epistemic caliber of the general public, *qua* the body that is, ultimately, tasked with political decision-making in democratic societies. Unfortunately, the empirical data paint a pretty dismal picture here, indicating that the public tends to be largely ignorant on the issues relevant to governance. To make matters worse, empirical research on how ignorance tends to breed overconfidence suggests that the public will not only lack *knowledge* on the relevant issues, but also *wisdom*, in the Socratic sense of an awareness of your ignorance. While increasing the knowledge and wisdom of the public might be thought an obvious remedy, there is, as far as sound political decision-making and action are concerned, nothing particularly valuable about knowledge or wisdom *per se*. In fact, it might just be that what the public needs is nothing but the most basic epistemic good: true belief.

**Keywords** Knowledge · Wisdom · Overconfidence · Public ignorance

## 1 Introduction

In a democratic society, the public is ultimately responsible for making political decisions. Since it is, clearly, desirable that the public makes *informed* political decisions, irrespective of whether it practices politics directly or by electing appropriate representatives, political philosophers have for some time been interested in the epistemic caliber of the public. Unfortunately, however, the empirical evidence paints a fairly dismal picture. Consider, for example, the following findings, due to Michael Carpini and Scott Keeter:

Only 13 percent of the more than 2,000 political questions examined could be answered by 75 percent or more of those asked, and only 41 percent could be

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answered by more than half the public. Many of the facts known by relatively small percentages of the public seem critical to understanding—let alone effectively acting in—the political world: fundamental rules of the game; classic civil liberties; key concepts of political economy; the names of key representatives; many important policy positions of presidential candidates or the political parties; basic social indicators and significant public policies (Carpini and Keeter 1996: 101-102).

Findings such as these constitute the norm rather than the exception, at least as far as the US citizenry is concerned. Indeed, according to Larry Bartels, “[t]he political political ignorance of the American voter is one of the best-documented features of contemporary politics” (1996: 194).

To make matters worse, research in social psychology gives us reason to believe that, in so far as we—i.e., the public—are ignorant on political matters, we will not only lack *knowledge* but also *wisdom* in the political domain, at least if we understand the latter in the Socratic sense of being aware of the extent of your ignorance. The implication regarding knowledge is straightforward: since knowledge implies true belief, ignorance implies an absence of knowledge, irrespective of whether we understand the former in terms of false or no belief. The implication regarding wisdom is a bit more subtle, but was noted already by Charles Darwin (1871), when he wrote that “ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge” (p. 3). How so? According to social psychologists Justin Kruger and David Dunning, because people who are ignorant tend to suffer a dual burden:

Not only do they reach erroneous conclusions and make unfortunate choices, but their incompetence robs them of the ability to realize it (Kruger and Dunning 1999: 1121).

The observation that we overestimate our abilities—intellectual or otherwise—is not new.<sup>1</sup> What is interesting about Kruger and Dunning’s research is that it suggests that this general tendency for overconfidence is not evenly distributed. Rather, those largely ignorant on the relevant matters tend to exhibit the greatest degree of overconfidence regarding their skills within the relevant domain.<sup>2</sup>

As hinted at in the quote above, Kruger and Dunning’s hypothesis as for why this is so is that, in many instances, the skills necessary for *making* an accurate verdict on an issue are the same as those necessary for determining what *constitutes* an accurate verdict on the issue as well as *identifying* the relevant skills in others. Let us refer to this as *the connectedness hypothesis*. The most important implication of this hypothesis is that ignorance robs you of the two most important ways of gauging and improving your epistemic performance, i.e., through self-evaluation and by deferring to others, respectively.

How does all of this relate to *wisdom*? On one historically influential notion of wisdom, to be wise is to be aware of the extent of one’s ignorance—a notion that Sharon Ryan (2007) refers to as *the humility theory of wisdom*. (Other notions of wisdom will be discussed below.) This is the theory at work in Plato’s *Apology*. In the

<sup>1</sup> See Taylor (1989) for an overview, as well as Pronin et al. (2002) and Sieck and Arkes (2005) on overconfidence specifically regarding our intellectual capacities.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Kruger and Dunning (1999); Dunning et al. (2003); and Ehrlinger et al. (2008).

*Apology*, Socrates and Chaerephon visit the oracle of Delphi, who tells Chaerephon that Socrates is the wisest person there is. This puzzles Socrates, since he takes himself to know nothing. At the same time, he cannot bring himself to believe that the oracle is not speaking the truth, so he sets out to interrogate a series of purportedly wise people, only to find that they all radically overstate the scope of their knowledge. Speaking of one purported wise man, referred to only as “one of our public men,” Socrates concludes:

[...] it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know (21 d).<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, being overconfident in your intellectual skills robs you of wisdom, in the Socratic sense. Indeed, someone who has wisdom (*sophia*) is aware of the limits of her knowledge and, thereby, exhibits moderation (*sophosune*), while the overconfident is, as Christopher King (2008) suggests, to some extent “epistemically hubristic” (p. 352).

Taking together the points made so far, we get the result that the public not only lacks knowledge on account of ignorance, but also wisdom, in virtue of how ignorance tends to breed overconfidence with respect to the scope of one’s knowledge. This is, arguably, a real cause for concern, given the essential role of the public in democratic decision-making. More specifically, the connectedness hypothesis gives us reason to believe that the public will not only be prone to make bad political decisions due to ignorance, but also be largely unable to identify representatives that possess the relevant skills. The latter point is, of course, particularly relevant since most modern democracies take the form of *representative* democracies, which require that the public—ignorant or not—at the very least is able to identify competency in others.

At this point, it might be objected that aforementioned talk about knowledge and wisdom gets the political job description of the public wrong. The primary job of the public in a democracy is not to deal with *factual* issues, but to vote on matters of *morality*, e.g., concerning what is just, fair, right, and so on. Moreover, the objection goes, in matters of morality, it makes little sense to speak of knowledge or wisdom (*pace* Plato, of course), at least not in the epistemic senses that have been concerning us so far.<sup>4</sup> As such, the significant degree of factual ignorance indicated by the public ignorance data is no real cause for concern—or so the argument goes.

However, this insular picture of moral judgment is far too simplistic. For example, whether or not it is morally impermissible to eat meat is contingent upon at least one empirical issue, namely whether the relevant non-human animals can experience pain. And whether or not there is anything morally questionable about homosexuals adopting children depends at least in part on the factual issue of whether growing up with homosexual parents is more detrimental to the child than is growing up with heterosexual parents. These examples can, of course, be multiplied, which speaks to the general point that no moral judgment is (or should) be held in complete isolation

<sup>3</sup> All translations of Plato are from Cooper (1997).

<sup>4</sup> At least if we assume some form of meta-ethical non-cognitivism.

from factual information. Quite the contrary; they should in all instances be subjected to and premised on the most accurate information we have available.

In light of this, the proper response to the above arguments about the lack of knowledge and wisdom on the part of the public is, again, a sense of worry and concern. But what should be done about this? One natural and quite tempting response would be that we need to increase the knowledge and wisdom of the public. Indeed, there is something inherently appealing about this idea. After all, if the epistemic caliber of the public matters for democratic decision-making and action, as the above suggests that it does, should we not expect things that have traditionally been considered *greater* epistemic goods, such as wisdom and knowledge, to make a bigger difference than *lesser* epistemic goods, such as mere true belief?<sup>5</sup>

If what is to be argued in the following is on the right track, the answer is “no.” More specifically, I will argue that, as far as sound political decision-making and action are concerned, there is nothing particularly valuable about knowledge or wisdom *per se*. In fact, it will be argued that this is so irrespective of what account of wisdom available in the literature we opt for, including an account that spells it out as a form of epistemic humility (§2), a kind of knowledge (§3), practical wisdom (§4), a cognitive achievement (§5), or a facilitator for public reason-exchange (§6). It will be concluded that what the public needs might be nothing but the most basic epistemic good—true belief—and that this, moreover, would be good news for the political philosopher interested in doing something about the often quite impoverished epistemic position of the public.

## 2 The Mixed Blessings of a Wise Public

It was suggested above that wisdom consists in being in tune with your ignorance. What benefit would there be to increasing the wisdom of the public, by in effect having us realize how little we know? One benefit—and an epistemic one, no less—would be that we would get rid of several false beliefs, namely false beliefs about what we know. But we would not be saved from our *ignorance* by becoming wiser. Given our ignorance and overconfidence, becoming wise would primarily consist in substantially *contracting* our belief-set. Our political ignorance would remain just the same—we would just be more aware of it. To that extent, there is a real sense in which we really would not be that much better off in virtue of *simply* becoming wiser.

But perhaps the experience of having your belief-set be contracted thus has some beneficial consequences on account of how people will respond to that contraction. For one thing, people confronted with their ignorance (specifically, via structured and immediate feedback) tend to become less overconfident.<sup>6</sup> To the best of my knowledge, available empirical evidence underdetermines how people tend to respond beyond that, but two possible responses come to mind. I will refer to the first one as

<sup>5</sup> By “knowledge,” I do not (and will not) mean *weak* knowledge, i.e., the kind of knowledge that can be considered *identical* with mere true belief. However, see Goldman and Olsson (2009), and Sartwell (1992).

<sup>6</sup> See Sieck and Arkes (2005) for a discussion.

*paralysis* and the second one as *motivation*—two terms that will make more sense as we consider the relevant responses in turn.<sup>7</sup>

The response I refer to as paralysis pertains to a potentially detrimental *practical* downside to becoming wise in this context. More specifically, given that the relevant data on public ignorance suggest that most of us are in a state of massive ignorance on matters political, simply realizing that we, in fact, know very little might make us unwilling to take any stand on political issues. This need not be a result of any epistemic paranoia brought about by the realization that we know so little; it might simply be a function of that we know so very little, consequently have very little knowledge to act on—and, crucially, are aware of this predicament of ours.

Consider an example. As a citizen, I take myself to know a few things about politics. At the very least, I take myself to know enough to have several political opinions, defend those positions in discussion, and vote in political elections. At the same time, I also have to admit that any true reality-check on my political knowledge probably would leave me with *very* few things that I could truly take myself to know about politics. Consequently, if I were wise, I would *not* take myself to know very many things about politics, be very hesitant to defend but a very small number of political propositions (if any at all), and probably not be willing to subject others to my ignorance in political elections. Like Socrates, I would most likely simply remove myself from public life (although that would be the extent of my resemblance with Socrates, I am afraid).

What this goes to show is that, for any meager epistemic benefit that there might be to the public simply becoming wiser, there might also be a potentially disastrous practical downside. In particular, as each and every one of us retreats from public life, the political machinery will be brought to a standstill. Not only would people be extremely hesitant to vote; most likely, there would be no one to vote for. And with no one to stand for public office, there will be no government, nor anyone to provide all the goods that governments typically are tasked with providing for their citizenry. That, it seems to me, is a prize not worth paying for wisdom.

But what about the possibility that, as a matter of psychological fact, people confronted with their ignorance through the inculcation of wisdom, thereby, become *motivated* to increase their knowledge by seeking out reliable sources on the matter? Moreover, if wisdom motivates one to increase one's knowledge, maybe a likely consequence of increasing the wisdom of the public is *not* political paralysis, but an increase in knowledge, rendering wisdom an *instrumental* epistemic good. However, this response makes a substantial assumption, namely that ignorant people who attempt to increase their knowledge by seeking out reliable sources tend to be *successful* on this score. But when it comes to knowledge attainment, being motivated is not enough. On the connectedness hypothesis, the ignorant do not only lack the skills necessary for making accurate verdicts on the relevant issues but also the skills for determining what constitutes an accurate verdict on those issues, and for identifying the relevant skills in others. Consequently, any assumption to the effect that an ignorant public motivated to expand their knowledge by seeking out reliable sources

<sup>7</sup> While these are possible responses, I do not want to claim that they are the *only* possible responses, although they strike me as the two that are most relevant for present purposes.

will tend to pick out sources that *actually* are reliable on the relevant issues would have to be considered dubious.

Notice that this is not to suggest that it is *impossible* for an ignorant person to reliably identify reliable sources. As has been argued by Alvin Goldman (2001), there are at least a handful of heuristics that a novice may use when attempting to identify reliable experts, even in cases where the novice is in no position whatsoever to gauge the expertise of the putative experts directly by considering the content of their esoteric arguments. Of particular relevance are heuristics that attempt to determine expertise indirectly and independently of the content of the esoteric claims in question by relying on general indicators for expertise, such as dialectical superiority. However, the matter that concerns us here is not what it would be *possible* for the ignorant to do, but rather what they are *likely* to do. Since Goldman gives us no reason to believe that the relevant heuristics are ones that we actually have a tendency to use, it is not clear that what he says goes any lengths towards alleviating the present worries about the likelihood that ignorant people will not be particularly good at identifying reliable sources.

At this point, it might be suggested that what has been argued so far just indicates that what we should strive for is not a public that is *simply* wise, but one that is wise *and knowledgeable*. By increasing our knowledge, we would, of course, escape the problems posed by paralysis and motivation, and be able to make informed political choices on the basis of our increased knowledge about matters political. This, however, raises a different question: If what saves us from the problems of paralysis and motivation is knowledge, what good is wisdom? Granted, by becoming wiser, we will become less overconfident (at least as far as our conceptions of the scope of our knowledge is concerned). But overconfidence is only a problem for political decision-making and action if one is deciding or acting out of ignorance. Ignorance, however, is not overcome through the inculcation of wisdom; it is overcome through the expansion of knowledge. In other words, to the extent that increasing the wisdom and knowledge of the public is a good thing from the point of view of successful political action, what is providing the relevant goods is knowledge, and knowledge alone.

To sum up, it is far from clear that there is anything particularly valuable about simply increasing the wisdom of the public, as far as political decision-making and action is concerned. More specifically, while wisdom without knowledge makes for paralysis or reliance on sources that are not reliable, wisdom with knowledge makes for *redundancy*, as far as the former is concerned. That is, of course, unless we had our concept of wisdom wrong from the outset, and wisdom just is a *kind* of knowledge.<sup>8</sup> I now turn to this idea.

### 3 Wisdom as a Kind of Knowledge

For all the influence of the Socratic theory of wisdom, it is not the only one. For example, in the preface to his *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes suggests that the

<sup>8</sup> It might be suggested that the Socratic notion designates a kind of knowledge, namely second-order knowledge about what you know. However, nothing about that notion commits us to understanding the relevant second-order attitude as one of knowledge, as opposed to one of justified belief, or even simply true belief.

*sophia* of philosophy involves, among other things, “perfect knowledge of all things that mankind is capable of knowing” (AT IXB 2).<sup>9</sup> Before him, Aristotle wrote in the *Nicomachean Ethics* about the same word that it designates “scientific knowledge, combined with intuitive reason, of the things that are highest by nature” (VI 1141b).<sup>10</sup> Understood thus, wisdom has very little (if anything) to do with moderation. It is rather a very extensive kind of knowledge.

Since this is an essay in epistemology rather than in the history of philosophy, we may bracket any interpretative issues pertaining to the particular notions of knowledge developed by Descartes and Aristotle. In addition, we may ignore for the moment the *content* of wisdom, which is something that we will attend to in the next section, and simply focus on the idea that wisdom is a kind of knowledge. Moreover, for the present purposes, we may understand what knowledge is in terms of justified true belief, plus whatever extra condition is needed to avoid the Gettier problem (a problem that I will not be concerned with presently). What we are interested in, then, is the following question: What is so good about a public that not only has true belief on political matters, but *justified* true belief, as far as political decision-making and action is concerned?

### 3.1 Knowledge and Successful Action

One straightforward answer is this: Justified true belief, or knowledge, makes for more successful action (political or otherwise) than does mere true belief. It is not so obvious why this would be so, however. Indeed, as noted already by Plato in the *Meno*, simply having a true belief about the way to Larissa will be in no way inferior to knowing the way to Larissa, as far as getting to Larissa is concerned (97a). Indeed, this point about the relative, practical insignificance of knowledge holds for any number of conceptions of knowledge. For example, someone with a true belief that is properly based on *evidence*, *coheres* with the subject's other beliefs, is grounded in *introspectively accessible justifiers*, etc., about how to get to Larissa, is not going to be more successful in terms of getting there than someone with a mere true belief to that effect. This is, of course, not to deny that someone that knows might be *epistemically* better off than someone with a mere true belief. Indeed, that this is so common assumption in the literature on the so-called value problem.<sup>11</sup> However, it is to deny that someone that has the relevant kind of justification for a true belief and, thereby, knows is better off as far as *successful action* is concerned, which is something that is granted by almost everyone involved in the relevant debates.<sup>12</sup>

I say *almost* everyone because some have argued that justified true belief actually does make for more successful action, compared to mere true belief. For example, working with a reliabilist understanding of justification, Erik J. Olsson (2007) has argued that a reliably formed true belief is more likely to remain *stable* over time than is an unreliably formed true belief, on account of the former having been reliably

<sup>9</sup> All translations of Descartes are from Cottingham et al. (1985).

<sup>10</sup> All translations of Aristotle are from Broadie and Rowe (2002).

<sup>11</sup> See Haddock et al. (2009) for a recent collection of essays.

<sup>12</sup> Hence, in his overview of the relevant debates, Pritchard (2007) takes what he refers to as the primary value problem to be how to explain why we value knowledge more than mere true belief, even in the absence of a practical surplus value.

formed, and that this is so because, “if one is using an unreliable method to acquire a given belief, the unreliability will tend to be detected over time” (348). More than that, a belief that remains stable makes for more successful action than does a belief that is liable to being given up over time, since a belief that you might lose along the way will not be a helpful, diachronic companion in the execution of prolonged action, premised in part or in full on the belief in question.

The main problem for this kind of suggestion has been identified by Jonathan Kvanvig (2003), who points out about a related suggestion due to Timothy Williamson (2000) that one way to bring about a high degree of stability of belief is by way of *dogmatism*, where someone is dogmatic to the extent that she simply refuses to change her mind. Olsson replies by suggesting that the relevant claim “is that the proportion of stable beliefs among those that are true and reliably produced is greater than the proportion of stable beliefs among those that are true but unreliably produced” and that “this statement about proportions can be true even though in some cases unreliably acquired true beliefs are as stable as, or even more stable than, reliably acquired ones” (2007, p. 350). That may be so, but Kvanvig’s point remains: given that dogmatism may be just as (if not *more*) conducive to stability among one’s true belief as (or than) reliable-belief formation, how are we to justify the claim that *stability*—rather than some property present in the paradigmatically “good” ways of belief-formation, and absent in paradigmatically “bad” ones (including dogmatic belief-formation)—is what makes for successful action? It is unclear.

### 3.2 Knowledge and Convincingness

In response to the above, it might be argued that justified true belief has an advantage over mere true belief in that someone in possession of the former will be more successful at *convincing* others of the truth than is someone lacking justification. This would clearly be a benefit for political discourse, as it would imply that citizens justified in their true belief would facilitate the propagation of truth throughout the public better than those lacking the relevant justifications. But keep in mind what seems a psychological truism: taking yourself to believe truly implies taking yourself to believe with good reason. Indeed, given a properly functioning psychology, the moment we start to think of one of our beliefs that we *lack* good reason to hold it we cease to believe the relevant proposition. What this implies, of course, is that even a mere true belief—i.e., a true belief that lacks *good* reason—will be accompanied by the believing subject taking herself to have good reason, in so far as the matter is pondered (as it surely will be when we try to convince others of the truth on the relevant matters). More than that, given that *bad* reasons can be as convincing as good reasons—indeed, if political rhetoric has taught us anything, it is surely this—it is highly questionable that someone will be more convincing simply in virtue of her beliefs, as a matter of fact, being based on good reasons. Differently put, there is no correlation between being justified and being convincing.

### 3.3 Knowledge and Propaganda

But perhaps we set ourselves too ambitious of a goal at the outset. After all, for present purposes, there is no need to identify a *general* benefit of knowledge over

mere true belief, as opposed to some particular benefit for political decision-making or action. In light of this, we may consider the possibility that a public that believes truly and with justification is less likely to be swayed by persuasive<sup>13</sup> but false *propaganda* than one that simply believes truly. But in virtue of what is a knowing public less likely to be swayed thus, compared to a truly believing public? On account of either cognitively *internal* facts, i.e., facts accessible by way of introspection, or cognitively *external* facts, i.e., facts not necessarily accessible thus.

Let us consider internal facts first and note that, *pace* Cartesian rationalists, there is (unfortunately) no cognitively transparent mark of truth, neither on the first order level of what we believe about the world, nor on the second order level of what we believe about the epistemic statuses of our beliefs.<sup>14</sup> As noted above, if we believe something, be it for objectively good reasons or not, it will *seem* true and well supported to us—otherwise we wouldn't believe it. As such, the justified agent who comes across persuasive but misleading propaganda is in the same boat as the non-justified agent who comes across the same, as far as their respective cognitively internal worlds are concerned: Previously, they took themselves to have good grounds for their beliefs; now, it seems that they have reason to surrender some of them. In other words, being justified will not *insulate* you from coming across misleading yet persuasive reasons to the effect that you should change your mind.<sup>15</sup>

It might, of course, still be the case that having justified true belief is going to protect the public from false yet misleading propaganda *to a greater degree* than is mere true belief. Moreover, in light of the anti-transparency point above, it might be maintained that the relevant protection stems from a cognitively *external* fact, on account of which knowing subjects simply are less prone to be swayed by persuasive but false propaganda, irrespective of how things appear from the inside. But why would that be? Consider two possible explanations. On the first explanation, being justified makes you less likely to reconsider your belief in light of propaganda in virtue of making you less likely to reconsider your belief in light of *any* input. That, however, does not look like justification; that looks like dogmatism. On the second explanation, being justified makes you less likely to reconsider your belief specifically in light of *false* input, including false input that takes the form of propaganda. But it is hard to see why that would be. More specifically, consider the following processes:

<sup>13</sup> Here and henceforth, I will *not* take 'persuasive' to be a success term, since something may be persuasive, even if it fails to persuade in some instances—it just cannot fail to persuade anyone in any situation. Thanks to Mikael Janvid for highlighting this issue to me.

<sup>14</sup> This is, of course, compatible with there being a certain *phenomenology* to apprehending some truths. What is being denied is whether that phenomenology in general *tracks* the truth. For two relevant discussions, see Conee (1998) on "seeing the truth" and Williamson (2000) on anti-luminosity.

<sup>15</sup> It might be objected that, given that the standards of reasons or evidence required for true belief to amount to knowledge, clearly, are higher than the standards for simply holding a true belief, the likelihood that one loses a known belief due to misleading evidence is lower than the likelihood that one loses a merely true belief due to misleading evidence. However, this would only support the relevant asymmetry between justified and mere true belief when it comes to a subject's susceptibility to propaganda, had the matter of whether we are believing in a manner that satisfies the relevant standards always been transparent to the subject in question. However, as was just argued, that is not so. Consequently, *actually* having satisfied the relevant standards is not something that guarantees that you will not run into misleading yet persuasive evidence that suggests that you are *not*.

- (a) The process  $P_1$  through which you *formed* your belief  $B$ .
- (b) The processes  $P_2, \dots, P_n$  through which you *diachronically evaluate further evidence* about whether or not  $B$  is true.

Assuming that the particular external factors that are relevant to justification are those pertaining to reliability, i.e., assuming *reliabilism*,<sup>16</sup> the relevant belief,  $B$ , being justified implies that  $P_1$  is reliable. However, when it comes to our abilities to withstand someone attempting to throw doubt on  $B$ , when already formed, what matters is not whether the belief was reliably formed, i.e., whether  $P_1$  is reliable, but whether the processes utilized in evaluating further evidence about whether  $B$  is true—i.e., processes  $P_2, \dots, P_n$ —are reliable. And, crucially,  $P_1$  being reliable does not imply or even make it more likely than it otherwise would have been that  $P_2, \dots, P_n$  are, too.

The best way to show why this is so is by way of an example. Say that you form a perceptual belief that  $p$  by scanning the nearby tables of a crowded restaurant. If the process employed is a reliable one, your belief is justified (again, assuming reliabilism). Now, imagine that someone contests whether  $p$  is, in fact, the case. And not only that: the interlocutor in question has a fairly persuasive (or at least non-crazy) story about *why* you are mistaken, such as that you have had a couple of whiskies and that you, like people in general, have a tendency to imagine things when you have had one or two too many. This calls your belief that  $p$  into question. More than that, the proper way to proceed now is *not* to look again (although we might be inclined to do that, too, even if that does not settle anything vis-à-vis the disputed belief), but to, say, consult your memory in order to calculate the number of drinks you have had and of what, and introspect in order to detect any phenomenological signs of intoxication. However, note that in so doing, you are applying a completely different set of processes, i.e., memorial and introspective processes, from the perceptual processes utilized in forming the original belief. Moreover, your *perceptual* processes being reliable, of course, does not imply or even make it more likely than it otherwise would have been that your *introspective* and *memorial* processes also are reliable.

This is why your beliefs, having been reliably formed, do not necessarily or even generally make you more reliable or otherwise discriminating in your responses to persuasive propaganda. The processes utilized in the *evaluation* of whether you should give up on some particular belief of yours in light of persuasive (but false) input need not be identical to those that were utilized in the *formation* of your beliefs, which is why it cannot be ruled out that even beliefs that have been reliably formed will be subject to biased evaluation in light of persuasive propaganda. And that is why having justified true belief is not going to protect the public from false but misleading propaganda to a greater degree than is mere true belief.

#### 4 The Contents of Wisdom

At the beginning of the previous section, we temporarily bracketed the issue of whether wisdom was not just a kind of knowledge, but a particularly *extensive* kind

<sup>16</sup> Notice, however, that the following argument can be made in terms of any externalist analysis of justification, and does not *require* that such externalism be spelled out in reliabilist terms.

of knowledge. In the present section, however, I will factor in the *content* of the wise person's knowledge, in order to see if that makes a difference when it comes to the claim that there is something particularly valuable about a wise public as opposed to a public that merely believes truly. More specifically, let us consider the idea that a wise person is not simply a person that knows something, but one that knows *a lot about some very particular things*.

Above, we saw Descartes spell out wisdom (*sophia*) in terms of “perfect knowledge of all things that mankind is capable of knowing” (AT IXB 2), and Aristotle describe the same in terms of “scientific knowledge, combined with intuitive reason, of the things that are highest by nature” (VI 1141b). Albeit wisdom, understood thus, surely must be considered impressive in its content (if ever attained), it is less clear that this is the kind of content that is relevant to political decision-making and action. For this reason, consider instead Aristotle's notion of *practical* wisdom (*phronesis*) in his *Nicomachean Ethics*:

This is why people call Anaxagoras and Thales and people of that sort ‘accomplished’, but not ‘wise’, when they see them lacking a grasp of what is to their own advantage; and they say that people like that know things that are exceptional, wonderful, difficult, even superhuman—but useless, because what they inquire into are not the goods that are human. (1141b4-8)

In the same vein, Sharon Ryan (1999) suggests that a wise person “knows how to deal with life,” in the sense that he or she “knows how to live well” (124). Robert Nozick (1989) makes a similar suggestion when he writes that “[w]isdom is what you need to understand in order to live well and cope with the central problems and avoid the dangers in the predicaments human beings find themselves in” (267). Nozick continues:

What a wise person needs to know and understand constitutes a varied list: the most important goals and values of life—the ultimate goal, if there is one; what means will reach these goals without too great a cost; what kinds of dangers threaten the achieving of these goals; how to recognize and avoid or minimize these dangers; what different types of human beings are like in their actions and motives (as this presents dangers or opportunities); what is not possible or feasible to achieve (or avoid); how to tell what is appropriate when; knowing when certain goals are sufficiently achieved; what limitations are unavoidable and how to accept them; how to improve oneself and one's relationships with others or society; knowing what the true and unapparent value of various things is; when to take a long-term view; knowing the variety and obduracy of facts, institutions, and human nature; understanding what one's real motives are; how to cope and deal with the major tragedies and dilemmas of life, and with the major good things too (Nozick 1989: 269).

Nozick is probably right that being wise involves knowing things of exactly this sort. Moreover, it should be beyond doubt that having this kind of knowledge is a good thing, probably both prudentially and morally. However, the problem as far as our present investigation is concerned is that, if we define wisdom primarily in terms of its content, it is hard to see what makes *knowing* the relevant truths more valuable from the point of view of political action than simply *believing* the relevant truths. As

we saw in §3, it cannot be a matter of knowing truths being preferable to simply believing truths as far as successful action, persuasion, or resistance to propaganda is concerned. So what is it, then, that is so special about *knowing* these truths, as opposed to merely believing them?<sup>17</sup>

## 5 Knowledge and Credit

Perhaps we can try to characterize wisdom both in terms of the *content* of what is known and in terms of the *fact* that the relevant content is known as opposed to (say) simply believed truly. In so doing, we may hold on to Ryan and Nozick's plausible characterizations of the content of the knowledge of the wise, while adding a story about the significance of knowledge over mere true belief in order to avoid the problems posed in §§3 and 4. One intriguing account of the former that has gained in prominence lately is that knowing involves getting *credit* for your belief in a manner that merely believing truly does not.<sup>18</sup> For example, John Greco writes:

[...] knowledge attributions can be understood as credit attributions: when we say that someone knows something, we credit them for getting it right. When we deny that someone knows something, we deny them credit for getting things right. In one sort of case, we deny credit for success because there was no success—S's belief is false. In other cases we deny credit because success was realized, but not through ability—S believes the truth but it was a lucky guess, or there was faulty reasoning. More generally, the sort of crediting and valuing associated with success through ability (or excellence, or virtue) is ubiquitous in human life. It is instanced in the moral realm, the athletic, the artistic, and many more. In virtually any arena where there is human excellence or ability, there is a normative practice that attaches to it. The present account makes knowledge and epistemic evaluation another instance of that more general, familiar sort of normativity. (Greco 2007: 57-58)

If Greco is right that this is a plausible way to think about knowledge, this might account for what makes it more significant to know than to merely believe truly. This idea may, in turn, be applied to account for the difference between knowing the propositions relevant to wisdom, and simply believing them truly. All of which begs a question: Is this a plausible way to think about knowledge?

Several epistemologists of late have argued that it is not, specifically because credit theories of knowledge cannot account fully for innate knowledge (Lackey 2007; Kvanvig 2009), testimonial knowledge (Lackey 2007, 2009), and certain instances of perceptual knowledge (Pritchard 2005). Another independent worry that speaks more directly to our present concerns is that the fact that we can be credited in cases of knowledge but not in cases of true belief (granting for the sake of the

<sup>17</sup> Notice that this question about the relative merits of knowing as opposed to merely believing the relevant truths remains even if we take practical wisdom to involve the knowing of certain thoroughly *normative* facts or truths—at least if we assume that normative propositions are at all truth-apt. If they are not truth-apt, however, then the very question of knowing the relevant truths does not even arise, given that knowledge is a factive attitude. Thanks to Anne Baril for pushing me on this point.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Greco (2009 and 2007) and Riggs (2007 and 2002).

argument that it makes sense to understand epistemic evaluation thus) might not make a difference when it comes to our success in political decision-making and action. The best way to make the relevant point is to consider two hypothetical subjects: Reliant and Autonomous. Reliant is extremely naïve and believes everything she hears. Luckily enough, however, she happens to be embedded in a very hospitable epistemic environment, where it is not only the case that every piece of testimony that she receives is true, but also that she receives such a rich flow of testimony that she never has to conduct any inquiry herself. Autonomous, on the other hand, lives in an epistemic environment where some testimonial sources convey truths, others falsities, and it is in large part up to Autonomous to decide whom to trust. More than that, there are many cases in which there are no testimonial sources available, and Autonomous simply has to conduct her own inquiry.

As it happens, however, Reliant and Autonomous end up with largely identical belief sets. I say “largely” because there will, obviously, be differences in their beliefs about their epistemic environment (for example, Reliant will believe that all of her sources are reliable, while Autonomous will not—and they will both be right). Still, as far as the belief subsets that pertain to political matters is concerned, their beliefs are completely identical. Consequently, when they make judgments or act in matters political, they will be equally successful (or unsuccessful). Still, if we accept Greco’s conception of epistemic evaluation in terms of credit, we are not going to want to say that Reliant and Autonomous are on a par in terms of the credit that they receive for what they know. Reliant receives credit for none of her true beliefs. Sure, she gets things right, but certainly not “through ability.” By contrast, Autonomous is going to receive credit for many of her true beliefs, and thereby also *know* many things.<sup>19</sup>

But what this goes to show, of course, is simply that whether or not we deserve credit for our beliefs, in itself, makes no difference as for whether or not we make accurate verdicts or act successfully, in the political domain or otherwise. Consequently, whatever one may otherwise think of Greco’s account of the significance of knowledge over mere true belief, it is, unfortunately, not one that speaks to our present concerns.

## 6 Reasons and Social Deliberation

There is one final proposal to consider as for why a knowing public is better as far as political decision-making and action are concerned than one that simply believes truly. The proposal is that a public that knows is a public that has justification for their true beliefs and, thereby, also has cognitive access to their *reasons* for belief, at least on some conceptions of what it is to be justified (that may be assumed for the sake of the argument). Moreover, in so far as they have access to their reasons thus, they can

<sup>19</sup> I’m assuming here that Autonomous’ cognitive character constitutes the most salient part of the causal factors that give rise to the relevant true beliefs, as per Greco (2009: 20), and that the relevant beliefs are the products of Autonomous’ actual abilities, in Riggs’ (2007: 335) terminology (which I take it comes to the same thing).

also *exchange* those reasons in social deliberation and, thereby, make for more accurate political verdicts and successful political decision-making and action on part of the public as a whole—or so the suggestion goes.<sup>20</sup>

To get a sense of what is supposed to be significant about social deliberation, let us contrast it with a common, non-deliberative option: majority voting. When voting, we are not deliberating or exchanging reasons; we are simply aggregating our viewpoints by putting our vote on whatever alternative we prefer, be it on moral or factual grounds. This is, of course, compatible with deliberating *prior* to voting. The point is simply that voting *per se* does not *add* anything to the output, unlike social deliberation, which we imagine will somehow help inform the deliberating parties by exposing them to different viewpoints. Consequently, if there is *any* benefit to social deliberation when it comes to political decision-making, that benefit has to be manifest in a difference between social deliberation and majority voting. Conversely, if there is no difference between social deliberation and majority voting on this score, it is not clear why a public that knows and, as such, can exchange reasons in socially deliberative contexts is preferable in matters of political decision-making to one that simply believes truly.

When looking for the relevant kind of benefit, the first thing to note is, in order to make accurate political judgments, and promote successful political action, we are going to need to be informed on a series of matters. For example, we are going to need to be informed on such things as long-term economic trends (e.g., “Are we heading toward another recession?”), the likelihood of future policy decisions (e.g., “Will the Fed raise or lower interest rates in the near future?”), and the likely consequences of existing policies (e.g., “Will the health care reform have a negative net impact on the economy?”). But these are complicated matters, on which at most a minority of us is going to be sufficiently informed to make accurate verdicts. In other words, most of us are likely to be uninformed on the variety of factual issues relevant to making accurate political judgment. Let us refer to this as *the fact of widespread incompetence*.

Given such widespread incompetence, what we want social deliberation to do is at the very least to harness the insights of informed minorities. To find out whether social deliberation delivers on this score, however, we need to consider what is likely to happen to the reasons possessed by such an informed minority in social deliberation. There are two possibilities. First, assume that the members of the minority do *not* disclose their reasons. Indeed, there are a great many circumstances under which people simply refrain from disclosing what they (take themselves to) know, either in light of the *informational* pressure coming out of whatever happens to be the majority position (and the assumption on part of the minority that they, not the majority, are probably mistaken), or the *social* pressure associated with the risk of social sanctions against dissenters.<sup>21</sup> For whatever reason, people are very reluctant to dissent, even if the only other option is to report views that contradict what they really believe.<sup>22</sup> In other words, in the event that there is a diversity of opinion, and the informed

<sup>20</sup> The idea that social deliberation is not only crucial to democracy but also epistemically beneficial is particularly prominent among deliberative democrats. See, e.g., Talisse (2005), Young (2000), and Benhabib (1996).

<sup>21</sup> See Sunstein (2006) for a discussion.

<sup>22</sup> See Asch (1955) for some classical empirical results to this effect.

members find themselves in a minority, there is a real risk that the reasons they have in their possession will not even be submitted for deliberation.

Second, assume that above obstacles are, nevertheless, surmounted, and the members of the informed minority *do* disclose their reasons. What is likely to be the impact of those reasons on the deliberating group? Not particularly great, due to what is typically referred to as the *common knowledge effect*. Since the effect in question applies to information submitted for deliberation in general, and not just to what is known, a more appropriate designation might have been “the common *information effect*.” At any rate, social psychologists Daniel Gigone and Reid Hastie sum up the relevant findings as follows:

The influence of a particular item of information [on the judgment of a group] is directly and positively related to the number of group members who have knowledge of that item before the group discussion and judgment. (Gigone and Hastie 1993: 960)

In other words, what makes a difference when it comes to having an impact on group judgments is not so much *quality* of information as *quantity* of people bringing a particular piece of information to the table. This would be great news, were there a robust correlation between the judgments favored by the majority and the truth. Such a correlation might, indeed, hold for questions where the correct answer is clearly apparent when pointed out or proved.<sup>23</sup> However, the great majority of the political and policy questions that the public typically deliberates over simply are not of this kind, particularly given the fact of widespread incompetence. Consequently, it is far from obvious that social deliberation is going to generate outputs that are in any relevant way different from majority votes; in both cases, the output will simply track the majority opinion which, given widespread incompetence, will not track the truth.

To recapitulate: We started out by noting that reason-exchange was supposed to be what marked the difference between knowing and merely truly believing publics, as far as successful decision-making and action is concerned. Then, we noted that the value of reason-exchange, or what attracted us to social deliberation in the first place, was to be explained by it being potentially transformative, compared to majority voting. However, when we factored in the relevant social psychological evidence, it became clear that the relevant kind of reason-exchange is no more transformative than majority voting. Consequently, we may conclude—yet again—that knowing publics will be no more valuable than merely believing publics, from the point of view of successful political decision-making and action.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> For example, some results suggest that groups can outperform individuals when deliberating over questions that have demonstrably correct answers (Hastie 1986), such as mathematical questions (Stasson et al. 1991), random coding questions (Laughlin et al. 2002), and questions relating to Wason selection tasks (Moshman and Geil 1998).

<sup>24</sup> Note that the argument provided here does not suggest that we should give up on social deliberation, but merely that the psychology of social deliberation does not give us reason to think that a knowing public is better from the point of view of successful action and decision-making than a public that merely believes truly. That something does not do a great job of providing what we want from it is not an argument for giving up on it, unless there is some alternative that does a better job of providing what we want. As it happens, I have argued that there is such an alternative (see Ahlstrom-Vij, *forthcoming*), but nothing to that effect is implied what has been argued in the present investigation.

## 7 Conclusion: The Good News

By way of conclusion, the intuitive idea that greater epistemic goods, such as wisdom and knowledge, make a bigger difference for democratic decision-making and action than lesser epistemic goods, such as mere true belief, would have to be considered misguided. Is that bad news? I do not think that it is. What above arguments suggest is simply that several notions—such as knowledge, justification, and wisdom—that might be of great interest to epistemologists, may be of no direct consequence for the political philosopher. To that extent, the upshot is negative. On the positive side, however, what has been argued also suggests that, if the epistemic caliber of the public matters, then the notion that probably *is* of relevance to the political philosopher is that of true belief. That, moreover, is a good thing for political philosophy. After all, while empirical-psychological research on such subtle epistemic phenomena as wisdom is still in its infancy (albeit growing<sup>25</sup>), there is a long empirical research tradition studying how to ameliorate bias and correct for ignorance where the relevant research is almost exclusively formulated in terms of the impact of various strategies on belief accuracy and truth-ratios.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, if it turned out that the political philosopher interested in thinking about how to ameliorate the epistemically impoverished situation of the public should focus specifically on true belief, that would by no means be a cause for concern—if anything, it would be good news, given the vast empirical literature that she would be able to consult in so doing.

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<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Sternberg and Jordan (2005).

<sup>26</sup> See Gilovich et al. (2002) for a relevant anthology, and Bishop and Trout (2005) for an accessible introduction to the epistemological implications of this kind of research.

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