

## WHOSE AUTHORITY, WHOSE AUTONOMY?

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The presentation of the tension between the autonomy and authority of the scientific community should be recalibrated as the tension between the authority of the scientific community and the autonomy of individuals within a democratic state. Limiting the authority of the scientific community necessarily limits its autonomy (and in this sense the “tension” dissipates). Whatever constraints are imposed on the scientific community by the state, they do not by themselves sanction individual disregard for state policies. The tension, then, is between the political authority of policy makers and the autonomy claimed by individuals. There should be no indiscriminate license for following one’s “gut feelings” when a state adheres to (scientific) expert recommendations that protect and save individual lives.

**Keywords:** authority, autonomy, scientific community, anarchism, ideology, individuality, responsibility

## ЧЕЙ АВТОРИТЕТ, ЧЬЯ АВТОНОМИЯ?

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Представление о напряжении между автономией и авторитетом научного сообщества должно быть переосмыслено как напряжение между авторитетом научного сообщества и автономией индивидов в демократическом государстве. Ограничение власти научного сообщества неизбежно ограничивает его автономию (и в этом смысле «напряжение» рассеивается). Какие бы ограничения ни накладывало государство на научное сообщество, они сами по себе не санкционируют индивидуальное игнорирование государственной политики. Таким образом, противоречие возникает между властью политиков и автономией, на которую претендуют индивиды. Когда государство придерживается рекомендаций (научных) экспертов, которые защищают и спасают жизни людей, не должно быть места неограниченному праву следовать чьему-либо «внутреннему чутью».

**Ключевые слова:** власть, автономия, научное сообщество, анархизм, идеология, индивидуальность, ответственность

## Exegetical Introduction

In his essay “Epistemic Coercion,” Stephen Turner laments a variety of epistemic coercion technologies and recommends a variety of methods of resistance. The occasion for examining the boundary conditions of so-called epistemic coercion, according to him, is “the Covid pandemic [which] saw the development and widespread use of actual means of knowledge suppression and epistemic engineering, both within science and with respect to expert claims, within nominally free societies.” His



argument seems to conflate “epistemic engineering,” which seems to stand for policy directives related to a global epidemic that claimed more than three million deaths, and “knowledge suppression,” which appears to stand more broadly for activities regularly undertaken by the scientific community and the “expert claims” it espouses. The conflation of the epistemic purview of the scientific community writ large with the epistemic use (and potential abuse) of political leaders obscures the different registers where knowledge claims are tested, critically examined, and provisionally accepted. The call for “a reckoning with the disillusion from the idea of the purity of science and the neutrality of expertise,” as Turner insists, is neither new nor worthy of more urgency now (after the global epidemic) than it has in the long history of technoscience. Having encountered the problematic political and military framing and funding of Big Science (the “Manhattan Project” is only the most notorious of many other large government-sponsored projects), and having witnessed the output of the military-university-industrial complex, I doubt anyone interested in the activities of the scientific community, perhaps better understood as the scientific enterprise, is still holding on to any notion of “the purity of science and the neutrality of expertise.” In fact, court cases dealing with the effects of tobacco consumption and asbestos exposure have provided ample evidence that scientific expertise is indeed for sale to the highest bidder.

Given the mantel of “liberalism” against which Turner develops his warnings of epistemic coercion and his commitment to individual “epistemic autonomy,” it is reasonable to conclude, as he does, that we are all facing a “special epistemic vulnerability in the new digital world.” But does this imply that each individual is indeed capable of “assess[ing] the credibility of experts, politicians, and other sources of information” because of our “gut feelings about them, and a tacit sense of the realities they are describing”? It is one thing to call for some “epistemic resistance” that demands what Robert Merton called “organized skepticism” as an initial critical stance toward any hypothesis put forward and quite another to rely on one’s “gut feelings” alone. Even Paul Feyerabend, to whom Turner refers as the maverick critic of expertise and the dogmatism of the scientific method, the one provocatively suggesting that “anything goes,” remained beholden to the pragmatic feedback-loop that would or would not warrant accepting one theory or practice over another (alternative Chinese medicine and practice has been his favorite example 1975). One wonders what to make of Turner’s advocacy of radical epistemic individualism, the kind that has the advocates of the post-truth era (he mentions Steve Fuller in this context) claim parity among all claims regardless of the factual evidence that supports them, which presents itself often as both extremely relativistic and divorced from the minimal requirements, however flawed, of the scientific method. The political abuse of knowledge claims and the deliberate political manipulation



of the disputes among scientific experts in and of themselves offer no license for completely ignoring those minimal (methodological) requirements. When science studies critics, like Bruno Latour [Latour, 2004], recognized how their critiques were weaponized by post-truth adherents, they took responsibility for the unintended consequences of their textual analyses and reframed their work as getting “closer to the facts” rather than detaching themselves from empirical reality.

Framing his concern with epistemic coercion in the tradition of liberalism (associated for him with Hayek), Turner argues that “epistemic autonomy, the individual as thinking and valuing, [is] a central normative commitment” of liberalism. This individualized “normative commitment” is undermined from the very start by scientific expertise, theoretically and practically. He admits that “liberalism also tolerates coercion, in the form of the coercive system of the law, as a necessity,” and that “in practice, liberalism tolerates epistemic coercion, in the form of mandatory education, but attempts to make it neutral.” Despite these caveats, Turner insists that what is actually meant by “epistemic autonomy” is “real epistemic authority,” that is, “the individual thinker is her own final ‘authority’.” If one’s autonomy rests on one’s authority – presumably, one’s capacity and inclination to author one’s knowledge claims and be the arbiter of others’ authorship of alternative knowledge claims – no wonder Turner must partially abandon his liberal commitment and admit in unqualified terms that “epistemic autonomy is a myth.” Since time and again Turner compares science to theology and scientific institutions to religious ones, is the said “myth” akin to a theological myth? And if, indeed, we must speak of epistemic autonomy in fictional terms, what does it mean both for the status or authority of epistemology and for the reverence we accord autonomy? Is there a slippage in Turner’s critique between speaking about the autonomy of the scientific community with its attendant authority and the autonomy granted individuals in ignoring the authority of the scientific community? In what follows, I plan to offer provisional answers to these two questions.

### **The Tension Between Scientific Authority and Autonomy**

Can the separation between state and church so proudly announced (even if not adhered to) by promoters of the US Constitution (Jefferson’s famous “wall of separation” is invoked repeatedly) be applied to the relationship between science and the state? Would it make sense to leave the scientific community to make whatever epistemic claims it wishes, insist on its authority on all matters scientific (the way the churches do with all matters theological), without monitoring and framing its policy recommendations



in political terms for which the state is responsible? In this manner, the autonomy of citizens can be preserved even when scientific expertise is solicited by state representatives so long as the scientific authority underlying said expertise remains internal to its own community. Asking for advice does not entail a commitment to follow it. What Feyerabend saw and was alarmed by is the overbearing and outsized power the scientific community was wrongfully afforded without realizing two essential problems. The first had to do with the reliability and integrity of the scientific community itself, an issue he was concerned with because of internal power-relations, forms of Kuhnian indoctrination, biases and prejudices scientists brought to their work, and the ongoing threat of fraud and false of laboratory and observational reporting [Sassower, 2015]. The second had to do with a libertarian streak of absolute autonomy that should be granted to all members of any democratic state such that the authority of the scientific community would be controlled, contained, monitored, and regulated. The ultimate arbiters of what to make of scientific expertise should be the individuals affected by policy decisions relying on such expertise, as Turner reminds us in his essay.

Given the fact that, as Matthew Brown insists, “in practice, the role of scientific research and science advising are often *indistinguishable*,” and given that, as Turner insists, there is a fundamental “ineliminability” of expert judgment insofar as the state and its members still need it to make reasonable policy decisions, and recognizing that all scientific judgments are inherently value-laden to some extent, could any suggestions of a separation between science and state be feasible? [Brown, 2021, p. 194]. According to Brown, Feyerabend, who was concerned about this question, offers four ways in which the public can and should control science, or more specifically, constrain the kind of policy advice its members give to state officials (Turner’s main focus is on the Covid-19 policies in the US). In outlining these points, we should remember that they are talking about the autonomy of the scientific community and not the autonomy of the public. The first way of monitoring science has to do with evaluating scientific judgments, even if the public errs and even if the outcome (the public chooses) is worse than if scientific expertise were to be exclusively followed; the second has to do with supervision, perhaps the kind one observes in private and public funding agencies where the scientific community must explain its methodology and report on its findings (so as to be granted further funding or be cut off); the third has to do with an understanding that science, its methods and ethos, are just another ideology among the many the public encounters, and therefore should not be granted special neutral status (of so-called expressing facts alone); and the fourth has to do with a separation between science and the public [Ibid., pp. 195–200]. As Brown concludes, “Whenever science may influence or impact society, it should be monitored and evaluated by non-experts, to ensure its influence on society is beneficial and legitimate”



[Brown, 2021, p. 202]. This means that to preserve its authority the scientific community must yield some of its autonomy and be accountable to the public.

Does it make sense to have experts beholden to non-experts? Can lay people be trusted with sifting through scientific data and coming to reasonable (if not perfect) conclusions? Perhaps one way to answer these questions is to cite in this context Immanuel Kant's and John Stuart Mill's concerns with the "maturity" (critical and rational engagement) of the public – the individuals who take it upon themselves to review and choose which expert claims to accept and which to reject – individuals who must themselves be accountable to their own transparent procedures of adjudicating so that, as we have seen in the post-truth age, individuals are not granted the right to "their facts" or "their rights" to do whatever they want regardless of how their conduct impacts others. This is a subtle point that is often overlooked in abstract discourse of rights: outside of a starting point that grants one some basic rights (from free speech and thought to conduct that doesn't affect others), there must be some *standards of rationality and evidence* that guide decision-making processes of a community of individuals who are entitled to their respective rights but must live together. It is puzzling how quickly individuals move from having *some* basic rights to claiming to have *all* the rights regardless of the rights of others or in complete ignorance of basic facts that must be shared and agreed upon.

So, how can one justify the fact that scientific expertise is essential for societal health with a sense of *respect* rather than *resentment*? If we cannot "eliminate" the need for expertise, how can we tame its powerful impact? Brown offers us two sources for such respect, one coming from Michael Polanyi's notion of "tacit knowledge" which is embedded in and continues its afterlife among the members of the scientific community. Scientists do know *more* than the rest of us (about scientific matters), and their innate understanding of certain natural phenomena go beyond the textbooks (derided by critics of Thomas Kuhn) and popular publications available to any interested non-scientist. The second comes from Bruno Latour (mentioned above in the context of getting "closer to facts" through critique so that critique is neither destructive nor dismissive of empirical facts). After quoting from Latour, Brown patiently explains that "even non-scientists who are very committed, resourceful, and mature may not be able to decide for themselves without a laboratory of their own, without becoming a scientific expert in their own right"; that is, this set of conditions (for repeatable testing and reproduction of scientific reports) is unlikely to be achieved by non-scientists under the best of circumstances and therefore undermines the seemingly reasonable proposal for non-scientists to question scientists [Ibid., p. 205]. This also means that a degree of authority ought be granted to the scientific community when its members are explicit about their various biases and



values and are forthcoming with information about how their policy recommendations rely on their experiments and studies, however tentative they may be. In fact, we should acknowledge that more often than not scientists present their scientific views in *tentative terms* with many caveats and qualifications so as to refrain from claiming certainty or absolute consensus among themselves. The unintended consequence of this display of what Feyerabend would concede is the “integrity” of scientists is a skeptical and even hostile reception by individuals who expect “science” to have *absolute* answers without qualification. Isn’t  $2+2=4$ ? Don’t we know for sure that water boils at 100 and freezes at 32 Fahrenheit degrees? *Mature* individuals (in Kant’s and Mill’s sense) should have kept up with the history of technoscience and realized that probabilities were introduced centuries ago and that qualifications or falsifications *increase* the credibility of a scientific claim rather than detract from it (by narrowing its scope). Feyerabend’s insistence that scientists must not be trusted *a priori* must be accompanied with a similar insistence about the burden that should be placed *a posteriori* on non-scientists.

I have read Feyerabend’s more provocative rhetoric with the same sentiment expressed by Brown that what he actually recommends is a *gradual* shift from letting scientific expertise have absolute authority over public policies and a view that grants absolute autonomy to individuals in disregarding any and all scientific advice [Sassower, 1993]. The plea for gradualism – degrees of authority and degrees of autonomy – is important to emphasize at this juncture, as it requires a collaborative stance from both science and the state (and the individuals who constitute both). As Nathaniel Laor has argued for decades, instead of claiming the absolute authority of clinicians, degrees of autonomy should be granted to mental health patients whereby they are consulted about their own treatment, that is, supervised up to a point where experts (medical clinicians) must weigh in in order to protect patients who may choose to act against their own best interests [Laor, 1984a; 1984b]. In other words, if we introduce *degrees of authority* and *degrees of autonomy* to the discussion, and if we clarify *whose autonomy* is at stake, the tension between scientific authority and autonomy (both for the community of scientists and for the individuals encountering its expert advice) may be reduced if not fully dissolved.

## **The Tension Between Political Authority and Personal Autonomy**

Though commentators and critics of Feyerabend have cast his views in ways that cohere with their own concerns with the role and position of the scientific community in modern democracies, and though their



focus has been on the authority and autonomy of the scientific community (while conceding that scientific expertise is essential for setting public policies), it seems to me that the tension is not so much between the authority and autonomy granted to the scientific community as with its authority in relation to the autonomy of the public to endorse, apply, reject, or revise expert judgement put forth by the scientific community. It is in this light that I reject the assessment of Brown, for example, who sets a standard binary between curtailing “the authority of scientific experts,” which for him is tantamount to “epistemic anarchism” and curtailing “the autonomy of scientific practice,” which for him is tantamount to “strong accountability” of scientists to the public [Brown, 2021, p. 209]. It seems that curtailing the former is bound up with curtailing the latter, so that whenever the authority of the scientific community is challenged *ipso facto* so is its autonomy. This false binary explains, in my mind, only one side of the tension, namely, what to do with the scientific community. Though the provocative concept of anarchism is bandied about, it is clearly of the same variety explained by Robert Paul Wolff (whose 1998 book Brown cites).

Epistemic anarchism means in this context the openness to multiple expert opinions rather than reliance on a single opinion rendered by the scientific community as if such singularity can ever be witnessed. For as many experts there are, and for as many data sets there are, consensus is difficult to come by, especially in scientific matters. Some studies are exclusively dependent on the collection of empirical data while others emanate from computerized simulations: can the two kinds of analysis be compared, let alone be combined? Once timelines are added to these analyses, as in the case with climate change and environmental hazards, different results are bound to be incomparable. So, if by epistemic anarchism we mean an openness to a plurality of scientific expert views (perhaps in the postmodernist sense), then the choice to be made by public officials and state-appointed policy experts may not be as difficult as it may at first seem, because the choice would have to adhere to a set criteria of applicability set by the state (for pragmatic as well as ideological reasons). Those criteria, in turn, will be explicit and transparent so that the “strong accountability” (Brown formulates) is directed not at scientific experts but at public officials, political leaders, and policy wonks. In short, individuals might be less concerned with the credibility of scientific expertise (which will be vetted by public officials and policy wonks) and more with the integrity and transparency of the decision-making processes undertaken by state officials (those who are indeed accountable to the public).

Intermingling the integrity and accountability of one set of practitioners (scientists) with another set of practitioners (scientists and non-scientists elected officials) is bound to lead to a complete failure of oversight. And intermingling epistemic and political anarchism has the danger



of both equivocation and policy-implementation failure. This is not to say that there should not be a plurality of expert voices worthy of consideration nor that transparency of both the workings of the scientific community and policy makers should not be demanded. It is, however, an insistence on the secondary role individuals play when public affairs are at stake, when, for example, a lethal epidemic hits the nation. Focusing on individual opinions and conferring authority to anyone who wishes to express them, no matter how uninformed, is folly. This is not to take away individual rights, but instead to be mindful that those individuals, whose interests and protection seem ideologically paramount to both Feyerabend and Turner, are bound to be relatively uninformed as compared to either scientists or public officials whose business it is to monitor the scientific community and solicit expert advice (according to clear criteria, as mentioned above). Guaranteeing and sanctioning individual opinions, especially when they pertain to scientific matters which affect the whole community – like an epidemic where transmission is prevalent and life threatening – is outright *irresponsible*. It is in this context that Feyerabend’s own warnings about the ideological underpinnings of science should be extended to the ideological sanctity of individualism, a view that finds support not only from libertarians and some liberals, but from some anarchists as well. The guardrails of personal responsibility and a thoughtful study of the issue at hand (epidemiology, in the present case) seem absent when the mantra of individualism and individual rights is loudly proclaimed. However noxious a policy requirement might be (masking, vaccination, distancing), its credibility and efficacy rest on some basic tenets of the scientific method of testability, repeatability, and falsification and not on “gut feelings.”

## **The Myth of Personal Autonomy**

Having shifted the discussion to curtailing scientific authority to a degree (the degree will be determined on a case-by-case basis) and curtailing the autonomy of individuals to a degree (expecting informed critiques rather than “gut feelings”), the focus now should be on state institutions charged with choosing and implementing public policies. Questions of coercion and resistance might still be relevant in this political context, but their scientific or other provenance has become secondary. Within the context of a democratic nation-state, some basic social contract principle must be invoked to determine the degree to which individuals must comply with orders by the state and the degree to which the state is accountable to individual questions about the basis and validity of such orders and their applicability to each one of them. Whether one cites here the classical social contract theorists, such as Thomas Hobbes, John





Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, all the way to modern ones, such as John Rawls, or critics of democracy, such as Carl Schmitt, will have little bearing on the specific questions raised by Feyerabend and Turner about the scientific community as such. But before I move to the unique position of the scientific community within the modern nation-state, perhaps a quick reminder from Feyerabend's own work might help set the stage. He writes that "Democracies *as conceived by liberals* are always embarrassed by their joint commitment to 'rationality' – and this today means mostly: science – and the freedom of thought and association. Their way out of the embarrassment is an abrogation of democratic principles where they matter most: in the domain of education" [Feyerabend, 1978, p. 135]. It's odd to contrast science and rationality with "freedom of thought and association" as if they are not playing in the same sandbox. It may be in limited cases that one imagines that rational thinking is the opposite of thinking freely (for example, when only irrational and imaginative thinking is free while rational and logical thinking is necessarily constrained or coerced). In other words, this is a false binary that smuggles as a crucial appendage the entire education system, which could be rational, free, doctrinaire, ideological, and/or whimsical, depending on who is teaching, where one is being taught, and when this takes place in one's educational trajectory.

Are there boundary conditions to democracies (as conceived by liberals and their critics) where certain freedoms or certain degrees of freedom are curtailed? As Feyerabend's teacher acknowledged in a different context, Plato's "paradox of freedom" is relatively well-known, while the less known "paradox of tolerance" remains alive and well: how free can one be in a democracy and how tolerant must one be when encountering an intolerant interlocutor [Popper, 1966, pp. 265-256]? As mentioned above, the political framework within which the scientific community operates has constraints (codified in some formulation of a social contract theory) which in and of themselves do not *inter alia* undermine the very principles of democracy. Instead, they clarify the limit of democratic principles and carve out areas and practices where compliance, regulation, and Mill's Harm Principle must be considered [Mill, 1958, p. 13]. This is true also of the scientific community, which, in contradistinction to business cartels or professional associations, has a particular history with the state apparatus, related greatly to military needs that rely on technoscientific expertise. The age of Big Science (as mentioned above) is still with us, and the warnings of President Eisenhower (1961) after World War II about the military-industrial complex resonate to this day. If it's not the Manhattan Project of decades ago, then it's satellite surveillance post the Cold War; if it's not secret operations undertaken by the military, it's an expansion of the military-industrial complex to include the university system and all the Artificial Intelligence technologies developed by private corporations as deterrence against national enemies



[Mirowski, 2011]. My point is simple: though the scientific community continues to play an outsized role in the affairs of the state – as recipient of research and development funding and as intimate partner in technoscientific choices made by state institutions – the debates over the right of individuals to ignore epistemic claims or resist what they consider “epistemic coercion” should take place on a different register, one contextualized in political philosophy and not one that ignores the contributions of the scientific community to the welfare of the state. Lest this last comment sounds too captivated by the brilliance of scientific expertise, I should hasten to add many caveats, not the least of them about the oversight this community ought to accept not despite but because of the prominent role it plays in the state and the great resources it enjoys.

So, why are the likes of Feyerabend and Turner still worried about the autonomy of individuals once they have determined the extent to which the absolute autonomy (and authority) of individuals eclipses any reasonable argument about the political and social context within which such autonomy can be exercised? Moreover, who are these “individuals”? More precisely, what specific characteristics are associated with these abstract individuals? The Eurocentric folly of abstraction, as has been pointed out in detail by Domenico Losurdo [Losurdo, 2014] in the case of the above-mentioned Social Contract Theory, has in fact upended its universal appeal by recasting it as the Racial Contract Theory (a contract that excludes non-whites). The European enlightenments of the 18<sup>th</sup> century envisioned individuals that looked like them: white males of a certain social and economic status with private property to support them and many other privileges not observed among the less fortunate or among individuals around the world. Keeping this in mind would help narrow the discussion, however philosophical it must remain. To be clear, claims related to the autonomy of individuals focus primarily on privileged individual whose rights and their protection from coercive political agents, whether embedded in the US Constitution or in some international code of human rights, are sacred. No matter the reliance on a set of laws or the Constitution, the autonomy granted to individuals was never thought to be absolute: “No man is an island unto himself,” reminds us the *Bible* (*Romans* 14:1–26). And as enlightenment principles were worked out by G.W.F. Hegel [Hegel, 1952], for example, it was clear how the individual is both *part of a family*, then a community of those participating in civil society, and eventually a more codified *co-existence* within the state. As Hegel says in the introduction to his lectures on the *Philosophy of History*, “Freedom consists in regarding that term only in its *formal*, subjective sense, abstracted from its essential objects and aims; thus a constraint put upon impulse, desire, passion – pertaining to the particular individual as such – a limitation of caprice and self-will is regarded as a fettering of Freedom.” But this view of freedom, predicated on some misguided notion about the “state of nature,” continues Hegel, is itself



misguided: “We should on the contrary look upon such limitation as the indispensable proviso of emancipation. Society and the State are the very conditions in which Freedom is realized” [Hegel, 1900, p. 22]. The *realization of freedom*, rather than some ideologically abstract idea of freedom, according to this view, is contingent on being exercised within a legal framework of a nation-state, where social convention, moral principles, and the rule of law guide the boundary conditions of one’s freedom. Whatever the relationship of the individual to the state – assimilationist, reluctant, obedient, or resistant – *the very idea that a special refusal realm of conduct must prevail is both misguided and dangerous* (as the case has been with some extremist groups).

Promoters of liberty, as mentioned above in the case of Mill, demarcated the cases where one is completely free to act as they want (thinking, speech) and the cases where one’s liberty is constrained by the effects such actions have on others. This line of thinking prompted Isaiah Berlin a century later to distinguish between positive and negative liberty: the former related to those actions one is permitted to undertake freely and the latter related to one’s protection from the actions of other individuals as well as the state [Berlin, 1969]. No matter if subsumed under the umbrella concept of liberalism or not, these thinkers and many other legal scholars who draw the conceptual and practical boundary conditions of one’s conduct, it is clear that the individual is never perceived to be completely alone. This matters a great deal because once recognized as a member of a community, as Social/Racial Contract Theory from Plato to Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau reminds us, the *conceptualized individual* is in fact always already constrained by the social, political, economic, moral, and epistemological contexts wherein they exist. In this sense, then, the *ontological status of the individual is epistemologically predetermined*, leading some Africana Studies scholars to speak fluently about one’s ontoepistemological status rather than separating the ontological from the epistemological, as has been the standard approach of Eurocentric metaphysics [Huuki & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2023]. This view also explains the different perspectives (or standpoints, in the feminist sense) from which one speaks and thinks, knows and explains epistemological claims and models. Scientific experts, then, offer a privileged epistemic view of the world, but one that by definition remains partial. Instead of dismissing their view(s) offhand or setting it (them) up as having no advantage over other, non-scientific view(s), it may be more productive to ask these experts to couch their pronouncement with what may seem implicit (tacit, in Polanyi’s sense) to them but unknown to non-scientists, namely, make explicit their scientific presuppositions, prejudices, and limitations. In doing so, scientists interested in policy matters may become the kind of collaborators with non-scientists envisioned by John Dewey’s notion of “collective inquiry,” the kind that should be the bedrock of any democracy, as Brown reminds us [Brown, 2021, p. 211].



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