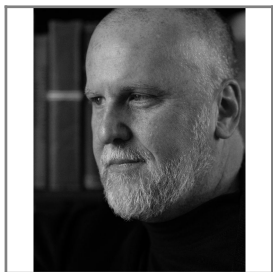


TRUTH OVER DEMOCRACY OR DEMOCRACY OVER TRUTH? REFLECTIONS ON RORTY AND FEYERABEND

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Paul Feyerabend and Richard Rorty were both famously suspicious of an objective concept of truth, in part because they shared the suspicion that concepts like truth and reason were irrevocably anti-democratic. As Feyerabend saw it, an overreliance on a naïve objectivist conception of truth and rationality encouraged a “tyranny of truth”, one according to which science should have an overly privileged role to play in deciding what society ought to do. Similarly, Rorty believed truth was a concept ill-suited for democracy. In this paper, I offer some brief reflections on the view that political truth is ill-suited for democratic politics. I argue that Rorty and Feyerabend are right that the concepts of truth and knowledge have political meaning, and that as a result, the question of “who knows” (and who doesn't) are partly political questions. But while Feyerabend was right to think we cannot give priority to the epistemic over the political in democracy, neither, I conclude, should we reverse that priority.

Keywords: Democracy, Feyerabend, Rorty, Truth, Political Epistemology

ИСТИНА ВЫШЕ ДЕМОКРАТИИ ИЛИ ДЕМОКРАТИЯ ВЫШЕ ИСТИНЫ? РАЗМЫШЛЕНИЯ О РОРТИ И ФЕЙЕРАБЕНДЕ

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Пол Фейерабенд и Ричард Рорти, как известно, с подозрением относились к объективной концепции истины, отчасти потому, что разделяли мнение о том, что такие понятия, как истина и разум, являются необратимо антидемократическими. По мнению Фейерабенда, чрезмерное доверие к наивной объективистской концепции истины и рациональности способствовало «тирании истины». Согласно ей наука, рассматриваемая как та, что имеет наилучший доступ к тому, что объективно истинно, должна играть чрезмерно привилегированную роль в принятии решений о том, что должно делать общество. Точно так же Рорти считал, что истина это концепция, плохо подходящая для демократии, и эта тема возникает на самой первой странице его посмертной книги «Прагматизм как антиавторитаризм». В этой статье я делюсь своими соображениями по поводу того, что политическая истина плохо подходит для демократической политики. Я утверждаю, что Рорти и Фейерабенд правы в том, что понятия истины и знания имеют политическое значение, и что в результате вопрос о том, «кто знает» (а кто нет), отчасти



является политическим вопросом. Но хотя Фейербенд был прав, полагая, что при демократии мы не можем отдавать приоритет эпистемическому перед политическим, я также заключаю, что мы не должны отказываться от этого приоритета.

Ключевые слова: демократия, Фейерабенд, Рорти, истина, политическая эпистемология

The concept of objective truth – the idea that propositions are true independently of human attitudes about them – has long been associated with absolute political authority. The roots of that association range from Jesus’s remark in John 14:6 that “I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through Me” to Bacon’s even more succinct observation that knowledge is power. But the most direct connection is found in Plato’s argument that only those who know the truth should rule. Plato’s masterpiece presents one long argument for the idea that only certain experts can know what society ought to do. These experts, whom Plato conveniently identified as male, highly-educated philosophers like himself, are therefore the best fit to rule, and the harmonious society is one in which they do.

Feyerabend was famously suspicious of an objective concept of truth, in part because he shared the suspicion that concepts like truth and reason were irrevocably anti-democratic. As he saw it, an overreliance on a naïve objectivist conception of truth and rationality encouraged a “tyranny of truth”, one according to which science – seen as those who have best access to what is objectively true – should have an overly privileged role to play in deciding what society ought to do [Feyerabend, 1987, pp. 4–5, 54].

Like Feyerabend, Richard Rorty was also famously critical of the concept of objective truth. And like Feyerabend, that suspicion, at least in part, was based on his view that the concept was ill-suited for democratic politics – a theme that emerges from the very first page of his posthumous book *Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism*.

I want to offer some brief reflections on the view, shared by Rorty and Feyerabend, that political truth is ill-suited for democratic politics. By “political truth” I mean the idea that some political propositions – or propositions about what society ought to do – are objectively true or false. By “democratic politics” I mean inclusive, representative and respectful deliberation between free and equal persons about what political propositions to accept – that is, about what society ought to do. Democratic politics in this sense is a kind of practice, or way of interacting politically, which can take place in, or out of, formal democratic arrangements.

I’ll be concerned with three questions in particular. Each question touches on one aspect of truth’s relationship to democratic politics:

- (1) Are authoritarian, or non-democratic politics justifiable simply on the basis of some political propositions being true and others false?



- (2) Does it matter to political practice whether we have truth as a goal of inquiry?
- (3) Are judgments about who knows political judgments?

After some brief discussion of (1) and the historical connections between truth and authoritarian, anti-democratic ideas, I'll turn to question (2) and Rorty's arguments in *Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism* for a negative answer. I'll argue that these arguments, while unsuccessful, nonetheless remind us that we cannot ignore what I'll call truth's political meaning. Moreover, they indicate that our answer to (3) must be in the affirmative. In this sense, Feyerband was right to think we cannot give priority to the epistemic over the political in democracy. But neither, I conclude, should we reverse that priority.

According to Plato, just as a teacher's authority over a student and a parent's authority over a child could be said to come from their superior knowledge, so the authority of rulers too must come from their superior political knowledge. And one has such knowledge, Plato seems to think, when and only when one understands what is best for society. Therefore, the proper rulers (or "Guardians," as Plato called them) must be trained not only to recognize what is best for society but also to see their own interests as coextensive with those of the state as a whole. In Plato's view, the just state was like the person who controlled his appetites (i.e, the bulk of the population) and his temper (the warriors) by keeping them under the wise control of ideal reason (the Guardians or rulers).

Perhaps the most familiar, and dominant form of the Platonic argument is its Christianized version: God knows how we should live and organize ourselves, and only the chosen few can speak for God. Plato and his Christian followers were keen to emphasize that neither God nor the Guardians *made* the political truths true; God, being you know, *God*, is just perfect detector of them. Plato, to put it differently, was the paradigmatic realist about truth: he thought that what was true was independent of what we know. But one can also connect political truth with authoritarianism via *anti-realism* as well. For one can say political truths are *made* true by God / Authority / The Party or whomever. The Law-Giver is also the Law-Maker. Underlying the idea that God makes the political truth is the metaphysical assumption that there are no laws without a Law-Maker. Thus, there are no truths about what society ought to do, unless there is a God that makes those laws – this, as Plantinga famously noted, is a form of anti-realism, or the idea that all truths are knowable, and depend on at least one believer, and are in that sense not objective. For the theistic anti-realist about political truth, as the trope goes, if God died, or had never existed, everything would be permitted. Or more accurately, there would be no political truths or falsehoods.

Both the realist and anti-realist versions of epistocracy have been surprisingly resistant to attempts to bury them in the dustbin of history, despite there being excellent, even obvious reasons, both political and



theoretical, to reject them. The Platonic view that “those who know should rule” is the most famous version of what is sometimes called “epistocracy”. Other defenses include Mill’s infamous view that the votes of the educated should count more than the votes of the uneducated, or Brennan’s more recent argument that uninformed citizens shouldn’t have authority over political decision-making.¹ As David Estlund has pointed out, however persuasive these views may or may not turn out to be, they all must show why they don’t rest on a fallacious inference [Estlund, 2008, p. 3]. As Estlund puts it, just because you know more than me doesn’t, all by itself, make you the boss of me. We generally feel that something else needs to be said – some way of showing that, in some particular cases, it is just for the expert to be the boss.

Politically speaking it is unlikely that even Plato’s Guardians, or priests speaking for God, would always be committed to act on their knowledge of the plainly political truths (the political propositions) and only that knowledge – as opposed to their own interests. Indeed, Socrates himself seemed skeptical about whether anyone would really have the wisdom to do such a thing.² And history has certainly not proved the contrary. The enduring stains of colonialism and slavery, for example, paint a bloody picture of how those that profess the self-evidence of equality more often than not act for the sake of their own comfort and domination. And saying, “Well, sure, but putting history aside, *in principle* if the wise had pure motivations, they would be the ones to listen to,” is generally what it sounds like: just a way to put the history aside and ignore its central lesson: that even if the Guardians are uncorrupted now, they will become corrupted later.

So both realist and anti-realist views of truth have been used by philosophers to justify authoritarian politics. But in both cases, the inference from “there are political truths” to “therefore those who know them should rule” is fallacious without further premises. And that means the association of the idea of political truth and authoritarian, anti-democratic politics is not a conceptual, or logical connection. It is historical, and therefore carries with it an association of what I’ll describe below as political meaning. By saying this, I don’t mean to imply that the connection between the concept of political truth and authoritarianism is weak – I mean to imply the reverse. *It is because the associations between truth and authority are matters of historical association* that make them so strong and influential. That’s why the Platonic argument and its theistic alternative have shaped our theorizing about truth and politics for the last millennia and more. These political connections have encouraged the *association* of the very idea of truth (under any conception) with authoritar-

¹ See Mill’s “Considerations on Representative Government” [Mill, 1998] and [Brennan, 2017]. I don’t mean to imply that either author rejects the idea that truth has democratic value, or rejects democratic politics in the ways that Plato clearly did.

² Crito, 47c9–d2. See also [Estlund, 1993, pp. 80–81].



ianism.³ This association helps explain why, as Helène Landemore writes, truth has “a bad reputation in political theory” [Landemore, 2013, p. 224]. And that’s no surprise: Appeals to “the will of God” or the way that “Reality is and must be” have been used as cover by Kings and dictators for as long as there have been Kings and dictators. As Feyerabend put it, these ideas have been used to “make Western expansion more intellectually respectable.” [Feyerabend, 1987, p. 5]

In his last, posthumous book, Rorty argues that the historical association between truth and authoritarianism requires those who care about democratic politics should heed a lesson he attributes to Dewey. The Deweyan lesson about such politics Rorty is keen to impart, is that, “the romance of democracy... required a more through-going version of the secularism than either Enlightenment rationalism or nineteenth-century positivism and achieved. It requires us to set aside any authority save that of a consensus to our fellow humans [Rorty, 2021, p. 2].

This was a theme throughout much of Rorty’s celebrated career. As he once put it, while the “ideal liberal society” celebrates liberal values like open-minded,

This open-mindedness is not fostered because, as Scripture teaches, Truth is great and will prevail, nor because, as Milton suggests, Truth will always win in a free and open encounter. It should be fostered for its own sake. *A liberal society is one which is content to call “true” whatever the upshots of such encounters turns out to be.* That is why a liberal society is badly served by an attempt to supply it with “philosophical foundations” [Rorty, 1989, p. 52].

One way to interpret this remarkable passage would be read it as endorsing a particular theory of truth for political judgments or beliefs. This is not, I think, Rorty’s intended interpretation, but it is worth examining. Consider this line of reasoning:

Democratic decisions are decided by votes. This means that which political judgments are correct are decided by votes as well as the kinds of democratic procedures that precede votes, such as public forums and debates. There are no independent standards beyond democratic procedures to determine what’s true or false in democratic politics. To think otherwise is to long for foundations that don’t exist and runs contrary to the essential spirit of democracy, which is that democratic procedures need no foundation.

According to this line of thought, there is no truth about what we in a democracy should collectively do other than that reached by democratic procedures. It’s democratic procedures all the way down. In short:

³ See Republic, 412b and Annas, 1981, An introduction to Plato’s Republic, pp. 101–102 on this point, as well as the Republic, I 341c4–342e.



Non-Independence (NI): there are nothing beyond democratic procedures that makes plainly political judgments arrived at by such procedures true or false.

This may or may not be a theory of truth for every judgment with political meaning. After all, (NI) is silent about whether (a) there are truth-apt political judgments – plainly political or otherwise – that *aren't* arrived at by democratic procedures and (b) if there are, what would make such judgments true. Nonetheless, it is tempting to read the advocate of (NI) as holding that the truth of what I've called political propositions *is* constructed out of democratic procedures, in particular, votes.⁴ For example:

NIT: The political proposition that *p* is true if and only if that proposition is endorsed by the majority of voters.

As I'll explain below, it is clear that Rorty himself would not have endorsed this theory – which is a good thing, because it not even a little bit plausible. The basic problem is that a proposition being endorsed by voters (even all the voters not just a “majority”) is neither necessary nor sufficient for its being true. It is not *necessary* because democratic procedures needn't be adopted by democratic means. Take voting itself: a society might adopt voting as a form of decision-making and hold from the get-go *that every adult citizen should be able to vote*. Moreover, they might arrive at that view without any discussion, deliberation, or debate. They might simply assume it to be correct, perhaps holding it as “self-evident”. The proposition that every adult citizen should be able to vote is political; and it is, I submit, true. However, it wasn't, on our scenario, arrived at by voting.⁵ Indeed, the problem is a general one: there are many political propositions we arrive at, including judgments about which democratic procedures to adopt, that are not, nor could not be, arrived at by democratic procedures, no matter how wide and inclusive a definition of “democratic procedure” one might have. For it is a plainly political question whether, and how, the color of one's skin, age, gender, religion, ethnicity, or country of origin is politically relevant, and it is likewise a political decision how and to what extent such facts are relevant. We come to the political table with beliefs about such matters, and they shape the judgments we make about the procedures themselves. And

⁴ A view sometimes suggested. [Rawls, 1980], but later rejected, by Rawls [Rawls, 1996]. Habermas is sometimes associated with “consensus” views of truth, although he is at pains in later work to distance himself from them.

⁵ Proof: Let *P* be the true proposition that every adult citizen should be able to vote. Assume *P* was never voted on. NIT entails that If *P* is true, then *P* is endorsed by most voters. The contrapositive of which is if it is not the case that *P* is endorsed by most voters then it is not the case that *P* is true. From this we can conclude that either *P* is neither true nor false or it is false – contradicting the plausible assumption that *P* is true.



it seems likely that some of those beliefs, and the judgments we make in light of them, can be true – and false.

Being endorsed by the majority of voters is also not *sufficient* for the truth of a political proposition. Consider, for example, a democracy that votes to elect a leader who campaigns on an explicitly anti-democratic agenda – namely, that if elected, he will abolish the legislature and make laws by fiat and declare himself above the law. Suppose, for the sake of example, that the procedures used to determine the outcome (voting, but in addition, the flow of debate and the conditions of information) are democratic and fair by whatever standards you wish. If so, then, according to (NIT) not only is it true that this is what the society should collectively do, but also that we can't actually entertain the idea that it is not. For what we should collectively do is, by definition, determined by the procedure and the procedure alone. Advocates of (NIT) might allow that the outcome is morally problematic, but they must deny that it is politically problematic. But absent some view of political judgment that allows for this, that seems both a spurious distinction and a bizarre one.

As I indicated above, Rorty's own views on these matters are more complicated than the simple-minded NIT. He carefully says (in the above quote) that democracies are content to *call* true whatever judgments result from free and open encounters – that is, from fair democratic procedures. He does not say they *are* true as a result of that fact. In Rorty's mature view, the most basic reason to free democratic politics from talk of truth is that it adds nothing but historical baggage. What point there is to the notion can be explained without appealing to any particular theory of truth's nature.

Rorty recognized that the concept of truth, or the word "true", serves several different functions in our cognitive life. It can act, for example, as a term of endorsement, as when we compliment someone's judgment by saying it is true. We can also use it, as deflationists are keen to emphasize, as a device for generalization, allowing us to say, e.g. that "Everything S says is true" without having to repeat everything S ever said. And Rorty acknowledged that "true" has a "cautionary use" as well, or "the use we make of the word when we contrast truth with justification and say that a belief may be justified but not true" [Rorty, 2021, p. 51]. Rorty took the cautionary use to have *political* value, but it wasn't a value we needed to explain with a theory of truth in democratic politics. We can concede the normative use of the word without having to say much about truth itself because while the cautionary use is consistent with still explaining its normative force by way of the concept of justification.

For Rorty, this conclusion fell out of what he often called his "grounding premise", namely that "you cannot aim at something, cannot work to get it, unless you can recognize it once you have got it... [Rorty, 2021, p. 48]. He adds that, "the only difference between truth



and justification which makes... a difference is, as far as I can see, the difference between old audience and new audiences” [Ibid., p. 52]. As a result, there is no need for a philosophical theory of truth any more than there is a need for a theory about the nature of danger. “The principal reason we have a word like “danger” in the language is to caution people” [Ibid.]. Likewise, Rorty claims, the reason we employ the cautionary use of “true” is that future audiences “may not be able to justify the belief which we have triumphantly justified to all the audiences we have encountered” [Ibid.].

As I understand him, Rorty’s point here is that while we use “true” normatively, the source of the normativity involved stems from the concept of justification. And, he adds, “once one has explicated the distinction between justification and truth by that between present and future justifiability, there is little more to be said” [Ibid., p. 53]. As a result, Rorty rejects a main thesis of this book that the goal of having true beliefs has an important role in democratic politics:

I know how to aim at greater honesty, greater charity, greater patience, greater inclusiveness and so on. I see democratic politics as serving such concrete, describable goals. But I do not see that it helps to add “truth”... to our list of goals, for I do not see what we shall do differently if such additions are made [Rorty, 2000, p. 7].

Rorty is clearly right that, “Seek to believe what is true!” is as pointless advice as, “Seek to be happy!” But that hardly entails that we cannot seek to have true beliefs, any more than it means we can’t seek to be happy. We seek happiness and truth by pursuing that which reliably leads to them. In the case of happiness, that might mean pursuing having meaningful relationships or a satisfying job, among many other possibilities. If the world cooperates, and we work hard, these are likely to lead to greater happiness – or so we hope. In the case of true belief, it means pursuing reasons and evidence – justification for our beliefs. Again, if the world cooperates, and we work hard, reasons and evidence lead to more true beliefs than false ones.

Rorty, however, was suspicious of the idea that we should define a belief’s being justified in terms of its being likely to be true. To do so is to fall back into the sin of trying to ground our practices on concepts like truth. In his view, the correct approach was to concede a kind of “ethnocentrism” about justification, according to which what is justified is a matter of how we “Western liberals, the heirs of Socrates and the French Revolution, conduct ourselves” [Rorty, 2021, p. 76]. Ultimately, he seemed to think, we shouldn’t add “truth” to our list of goals because (a) there are historical connections between the concept of political truth and authoritarianism; and (b) adding truth as a goal would make no difference to our political practice; the question of whether our political judgments are true always ends up turning into the question



of whether we can justify those judgments to ourselves and the audiences around us.

I am not convinced. Indeed, I think the concept of truth – and in particular, the idea that we should pursue true judgments in politics – does make a difference to our political practice. Or so I will now argue.

Imagine a politically engaged community – call them the “Twitbookians” – whose political discourse is governed by just one rule:

Rule of Conformity: Say (or post) only those political claims that conform to the commitments of your political allies.

In practice, that means posting what will be liked (or at least not censored) by your friends and potentially disliked by your opponents. For the Twitbookians, it is *correct* to make a political claim, in the only sense they are responsive to and motivated by, when and only when it meets those conditions – when it follows the Rule of Conformity.

We can follow rules while not knowing we are doing so. Indeed, we can follow rules even while being mistaken – i.e. having false beliefs – about the rules which rules we are actually following. You can, for example, follow certain rules of grammar even without knowing what they are or being mistaken about what they are. So let’s imagine that most Twitbookians are unaware they are following the Rule of Conformity in their political discourse; they are ignorant of how that discourse really works.

It is easy to imagine that the Twitbookians’ ignorance of what motivates them doesn’t diminish or undermine the extent of their political commitments. Twitbookians are still committed to their political views, in that they are willing to act on them and speak on their behalf. They even defend their political judgments as “sincere,” and “true” and insist they’re concerned with “evidence” and “facts” when they consult sources of information about politics. But the only sources they consult are those that conform to their partisan preferences, since using such sources makes it more likely they will garner likes from their allies. In so doing, they describe themselves as following the evidence, since they know that evidence is a guide to what’s true. But Twitbookians aren’t typically ever motivated by, or responsive to, the actual evidence and facts, save where it helps them abide by the Rule of Conformity. They are guided only by what their side likes and what it doesn’t. In short, truth isn’t a value in their political discourse. They are blind to the norms that really move them, chasing the shadows cast by the fires of their commitments on digital cave walls.

Our little parable raises an uncomfortable thought: perhaps we are all Twitbookians. The fear that we are Twitbookians is the fear that truth really has no role, not only in democratic politics, but in politics generally. And it gets to the heart of Rorty’s position. For the Twitbookians, “justification” is going to mean showing that you are in line with the commitments of your fellow partisans. This is how Rorty sounds when he says we



have to concede a kind of “ethnocentrism” about justification, according to which what is justified is a matter of how we “Western liberals... conduct ourselves”. Our best social hope is to be better, more inclusive Twitbookians, but Twitbookians, Rorty seems to be saying, we shall remain.

I’ll lay my cards on the table: I think it is politically important that we look for more than this – certainly more than what the tradition of Socrates and the French Revolution can give us, but also more than an ethnocentric theory of justification can give us. That’s because such a theory isn’t a theory of justification but a theory of raw *persuasion*. Rorty is right that we can’t open the door and march out and pursue true beliefs directly. We can only pursue having true beliefs indirectly – by way of pursuing *evidence* that supplies us with reasons for belief. Indirectly or not, however, it is truth that supplies the point of this enterprise, and what distinguishes it from merely pursuing that which will rally others to our cause, or flatter our opinions. It is also what distinguishes it from the practice of answering objections simpliciter – that is, from the practice of simply saying that which silences your opponent, or gets them to nod in agreement. Reasons are important in and of themselves both epistemically and politically. But reasons for a belief or judgment are *reasons* precisely because they are not mere means to their own end; they are means to the further end of truth. Thus justification (reason-giving) is distinct from truth precisely as a means is distinct from its end.⁶

Moreover, by not valuing truth, Twitbookians are unable to realize other values essential to democratic politics. One of the simplest of these values is the idea of political progress itself. Democratic politics as I’ve defined it – as politics that favors inclusive, egalitarian deliberation about common problems – arguably presupposes that there can be such progress. For rational engagement in such politics presupposes that collective deliberation can help us do better than we have done before, to arrive at better, more just solutions to societal problems. In hoping for progress, we hope our political commitments arc in that direction. Yet the idea of progress is empty without a standard by which to measure it, and the Twitbookians are numb to any standard but what their partisan community likes and what it does not. Should their partisan communal preferences change, what claims count as correct or incorrect will also change – no matter what those changes may happen to be. For the Twitbookians, a change from one political view to another will only ever be that – a change. “Progress” is an illusion.

Yet the poverty of Twitbookian political life goes deeper still. Consider the democratic value of respect. A presupposition of democratic politics is recognizing that other persons are all owed a certain basic or “recognitional” respect – the kind of respect we pay someone just be-

⁶ For similar remarks, see Engel’s contributions in [Rorty and Engel, What’s the Use of Truth?, 2007].



cause they are a *person*.⁷ When we think of basic respect for persons, we are typically thinking of moral respect – that is, respect for someone as a potential moral agent. To give a fellow citizen basic *epistemic* respect, on the other hand, is to treat them as having epistemic agency. It is to treat them as a fellow reasoner, as someone who has the capacity to make up their own minds, to determine not only what they are going to commit to, but what they are going to *believe based on reasons*.

Twitbookians don't exercise their epistemic agency, they aren't motivated to exchange epistemic reasons; they exchange, at most, practical reasons in the form of "likes", "dislikes", posts and counterposts of their own, all of which follow the Rule of Conformity. They may not even have stable political beliefs. For all their passionate commitments, they fail to live up to a presupposition of democratic politics because they fail to show any basic epistemic respect to each other. How can they? Twitbookians don't even have basic epistemic respect for themselves.

Where basic respect goes, so does basic equality. For to participate in democratic politics means treating others as equals, in the sense that each person is owed an equal amount of basic recognitional respect, both morally and epistemically. But Twitbookians, in lacking such respect for each other, lack also a sense of equality. By failing to give reasons to believe those propositions they commit to, Twitbookians fail to treat those on the other side as equal epistemic agents – as capable of making up their minds about what to believe based on reasons. At best, one's opponents can be regarded as subjects for manipulative conversion. They are a tool to be used, a sheep to be herded, or a child to be led. They are not a fellow epistemic agent.

In sum, Twitbookian politics is not guided by basic democratic values. To be sure, there is nothing to prevent the Twitbookians from having a democracy in the *formal* sense – that is, by having a system of government where certain decisions are decided by vote. We can imagine they have a representative democracy similar to our own. But it is difficult to see how their society, even if it is democratic in the formal sense, could practice democratic politics in the sense of the term I've been employing here. Put somewhat differently, their democracy, if they have one, is not deliberative – not functioning as a space of reasons where collective problems are addressed via an exchange of reasons and not merely through the use of power – particularly the kind of power that comes from manipulating the strings of conformity and commitment.

⁷ Here I am only talking about recognitional respect towards persons, and leave open whether we can have such respect for other things, such as paintings or performances. See Stephen L. Darwall, *The second-person standpoint: Morality, respect, and accountability*. Harvard University Press, 2006. For arguments supporting the importance of respect for persons in democratic politics, see [Larmore, *The Morals of Modernity*, 1996].



The parable of the Twitbookians – and the rise of authoritarian far-Right politics around the globe – suggests that Rorty is mistaken that adding truth to our list of goals makes no political difference. There is a difference, and a very notable one, between a politics that has true beliefs as one its goals and a politics that only says it does. The Twitbookians, for all their talk of truth and evidence, don't care about such things, and their politics will reflect that fact – it will be motivated by issues of conformity and power alone, and the idea that some people may be right, and some may be wrong, will be irrelevant otherwise. Put differently: the very fact that we recognize ourselves in the Twitbookians – and are repulsed by that recognition – is what tells us that there is a difference between democratic politics involving truth, and politics that only pay lip-service to that idea.

Let's pause to take stock. Our reflections suggest that the following answers to our first two questions:

- (1) Authoritarian, or non-democratic politics is not justifiable just on the basis of the very idea that some political propositions are true or false.
- (2) Contra Rorty, having truth as a goal does make a difference to political practice. Arguably, a society that lacks that goal – that is neither motivated by, nor responsive to, the value of truth – is less democratic just on that basis.

I now want to turn to the third question, (and the one that arguably particularly concerned Feyerabend).

- (3) Judgments about who knows are often political judgments.

In the space remaining, I want to argue that (3) is true, but that we can grant this fact without having to abandon either (1) or (2). The key point is understanding what it means to talk about a judgment as political. Not surprisingly, there is more than one sense of the word.

One use of the term is the one I've employed when defining political *propositions* as propositions *about what society ought to do*. Call this the narrow sense of the term. Thus, political *judgments* in the narrow sense are those that explicitly concern what society ought to do – which have political propositions in the narrow sense as their content. But many of the judgments and questions we argue about are not political in this narrow sense. Consider judgments like *carbon emissions contribute to climate change*, and *mask mandates lower the rate of infection*. Judgments like these are about the physical world. They don't employ obviously normative or "ethical" concepts, and they aren't about a political system of structure. But they are clearly the subject of political debate. So too with judgments of history, or economics, or almost anything else – such judgments can become the topic of political debate and discussion, and can have political consequences, however pure (or impure), our moti-



ventions might be in making them. As Orwell illustrated in *1984*, even a claim like 2 and 2 make 4 could, in the right circumstances, play a political role. For the sinister antagonist of the novel, the leader O'Brien, that judgment comes to signify a challenge to the absolute power of The Party. The affirmation of it by the book's protagonist is therefore an overtly political act.

In short, any judgment can *function* politically, by taking on *political meaning*. When that happens, a judgment becomes political in what I'll call the *wide sense* of the term. The issue of whether a judgment is political or not in this sense arises frequently in many actual political debates, particularly those concerning whether certain court decisions or specific judgments made by scientific bodies are political or not. That such concerns arise, and arise so frequently, reflects the fact that the concept of the political itself, like other political concepts, is fluid and "essentially contestable." [Gallie, 1955–1956]

As I'll understand the term here, essentially contestable concepts are such that debates over their semantic analysis – debates over their extension or the property they denote – are entangled with debates over their political meaning. This entanglement happens when a particular conception of what the concept denotes becomes associated with particular ideologies or political agendas. Concepts like liberty, equality, and class are famously open to intelligible yet divergent extensions, attachment to which is just as famously driven by divergent ideologies. But these are hardly the only examples – as debates over the concept of marriage or even more recently the concept of a woman, illustrate. In all these cases, political debate is debate over which way to extend or limit the relevant concept, and different conceptions (that is, different beliefs about) what the concept denotes are associated with distinct ideologies. Likewise, the question of whether a judgment is political is contestable in just this way – which is exactly what we should expect if we agree with Carl Schmitt that the concept of the political is itself political [Schmitt, 2007, pp. 30–32].

Again, judgments become political in the wide sense when they take on what I've called political meaning. Political meaning is not a kind of propositional content; it is not a kind of literal meaning. Rather, the political meaning of something is the result of how it is perceived. And thus the political meaning of a judgment or claim for some community *is the sum of its perceived contributions to politics relative to that community*. This includes its perceived epistemic effects on power, the convictions and identities it is understood as expressing, and the actions it potentially guides. To grasp a judgment's political meanings is to understand how it is perceived to contribute to politics; to understand a judgment *as* political is to recognize it as having at least one political meaning in the aforementioned sense.



Like other kinds of social meanings, political meanings are not optional [Lessig, 1995].⁸ By this, I mean that the political meaning of a judgment is *not* something that the agent can simply decide to forgo. That's because a statement's political meanings, at least in most cases, are largely external to the *agent's* beliefs and intentions. Yet they are not independent of the beliefs, commitments, and actions of the *community*, precisely because a claim's political meaning is *constituted* by the perceptions of the community. Those perceptions include the post's perceived epistemic effects, the online and offline actions it is perceived to license, and the attitudes it is assumed to express.

With these distinctions in hand, let's return to (3), the claim that judgments about who knows are often themselves political. This is most obvious when the judgment in question is about who knows the political truths in the narrow sense – that is, who knows what society ought to do. For even if Plato was right, and there could be political experts who can know the truth about what's best for society as a whole better than the rest of us, *who is to say who they are?* How would we agree on who knows the most about what is in everyone's best interest – especially given that, as Plato conceded, there are bound to be some who pretend to have knowledge they do not? This is what Estlund has called the problem of “knowing the knowers,” and it seems to be an in-principle problem for implementing the Platonic position right from the get-go. [Ibid., 84ff] The point is not that political truth can't be known, but that there is no apolitical way of determining who those knowers are. Any judgment that one knows what is in the best interest of society is inevitably open to the charge of bias, that one is making the claim not out of concern for society's interest but out of concern for one's own interest. As a result, such judgments come to have political meaning, and are therefore almost inevitably going to become political in the wide sense of the term.

A similar result follows even when we turn from asking who knows the answers to narrowly political questions to who knows answers to scientific questions. The two issues are, of course, often connected. That's because thinking about what society ought to do – that is, in reflecting on what political judgments to make in the narrow sense, we typically have to aver to experts of various sorts – engineers, climate scientists, military generals etc. We often hope that the opinions and judgments of such experts will be apolitical. And we will be right in one sense – their scientific judgments about the natural world aren't political in the narrow sense. But they may well be – like it or not – political in the wide sense. They can have political meaning.

⁸ Haslanger: “The point of saying that an action has a social meaning is to understand it as having a significance by virtue of collective understandings, not just the personal meaning given to it by the agent (or patient).” [Haslanger, 2014, p. 13]



To see this, consider a climate scientist testifying in front of a committee of elected officials whether climate change is real. She says it is and adds that she is only stating what the evidence clearly illustrates. In response, a committee-member who is a climate skeptic retorts that the “witness is playing politics” since the evidence (he says) is “inconclusive.” He therefore rejects her as an expert, saying “she doesn’t know what she is talking about”.

Let’s stipulate that the official is mistaken. Our scientist does know what she is talking about. And climate change is real. Nonetheless, whether we like it or not, the question of whether it is real, and the question of who knows whether it is real, have come to have political meaning in U.S. culture. In most contexts, and especially during a contentious political hearing, the judgment that S knows that climate change is real has political meaning, since it will contribute to the political debate surrounding what to do about climate change. Does that mean we must agree that the official is right that the scientist is “playing politics?” Of course not. But it does mean that judgments about who knows can have political meaning *even if* their truth does not depend on anything other than how the climate actually is.

So the judgments we make about who knows and who doesn’t are often political in the wide sense. They can, and often are, infused with political meaning. That in turn means that we can’t simply hand over what society ought to do to experts, scientific or otherwise. We can’t simply ask the experts what the political truths are. We can’t do that not because these experts aren’t really experts at all in their respective fields. We can’t do it because the question of who knows the political truths in the *narrow sense* is itself a political question *in the wide sense*. That is, it will be a question debated because it will rightly be perceived to have political meanings and consequences. And this is why Estlund’s problem of “knowing the knowers” is a political problem, not just an epistemological one. The political problem is the problem of being able to *justify*, in the face of public disagreement about the matter, why only these particular people know what’s best. Saying, “Well, THEY know they know,” will hardly stifle any doubts. We need some sort of independent political or legal mechanism to help us *collectively* identify and legitimate who knows and who has the authority to rule.

Yet the truth of (3) should not convince us that political truths in either the narrow or wide sense are “unknowable.” Nor should it cause us to give up on the crucial, regulative role that the concept of truth plays for democratic politics. Rorty once argued that, “if you take care of freedom, truth will take of itself.” He ascribed this thought to Dewey: “Instead of justifying democratic freedoms by reference to an account of human nature and the nature of reason, Dewey takes the desire to preserve and expand such freedoms as a starting point – something we need not look behind.” [Rorty, 2009, p. 119] For Rorty, the idea that we need to appeal to the value of truth in democratic politics is unjustified form of foundationalism.



If we take the arguments I've been giving in this paper seriously, then we can still agree that both Rorty and Feyerabend were right to be skeptical of the "tyranny of truth" – or the idea that we can simply appeal to apolitical knowledge to decide what we ought to do as a society. We can't prioritize the epistemological over the political because questions of knowledge frequently *are* political – even if they shouldn't be. But neither should we put politics first, epistemology second. Foundationalism turned on its head is still foundationalism – just with the ceiling tiles acting as the floor. The right lesson to draw, in my view, is that we can't get away from the fact that our political and epistemic values are, at the deepest level, intertwined. The difficulty doesn't lie in seeing this fact; it lies in trying to make sense of how we should improve our values – epistemic and political. We must take navigate questions of truth and democratic politics together. Truth is not over democracy nor is democracy over truth.

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