

Political liberalism and social epistemology

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Outline

Introduction

The argument

The importance of freedom

Division of labor and identification of experts

Two kinds of dangers

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Two kinds of dangers

Allen Buchanan

Cast of Characters



- ▶ PhD, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1975;
B.A., Magna cum laude, Columbia University, 1970;
- ▶ James B. Duke Distinguished Professor of Philosophy;
- ▶ Author of 11 books, including *Justice and Health* (2009); *Human Rights, Legitimacy, and the Use of Force: Selected Essays*, (2009); *Beyond Humanity? The Ethics of Biomedical Enhancement*, (2010).

Goal of the paper

What is the goal of “Political liberalism and social epistemology”?

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- ▶ What does ‘epistemological’ mean?
- ▶ What is *political liberalism*?

Social epistemology according to Buchanan

All societies inculcate false beliefs (as well as true ones). Who we are depends in large part upon what we believe, and what we believe depends, more than we like to admit, upon our social environment. Among the two best confirmed sociological generalizations are that in all societies individuals' beliefs are strongly influenced by their social surroundings, and that most of us seriously underestimate the extent to which this is so.

Social epistemology according to Buchanan

Not just in childhood, but throughout our lives, believing, and hence knowing, are largely a collective enterprise. This is the central message of social epistemology, which has been defined as the comparative evaluation of how well social institutions facilitate the formation, preservation, and transmission of true beliefs.

Social epistemology according to Buchanan

The goal of social epistemology is usually said to be the identification of a set of institutions or, more likely, a range of sets of institutions, that are both feasible and more reliable than any feasible alternatives for creating, preserving, and transmitting true beliefs. This definition is close to the mark, if it is understood to encompass the striking of an optimal balance between maximizing the creation, preservation, and transmission of true beliefs and reducing the risks of false beliefs.

Social epistemology according to Buchanan

It might be the case that a set of institutions scores very high on the production, preservation, and dissemination of true beliefs overall, but nonetheless tends to inculcate an inordinately high number of false beliefs. Similarly, an institution might score high on avoiding false beliefs, but only because it produces few beliefs, and hence few true beliefs.

Social epistemology according to Buchanan

To allow for these possibilities, the goal of social epistemology should be defined so as to acknowledge that the strategies for maximizing true beliefs and for maximally reducing the risks of false beliefs may conflict. In such cases, what is to be sought is an optimum, that is, the best trade-off between these two values.

Summing up

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- ▶ According to Buchanan, subjects' webs of beliefs show a deep epistemic dependence on the society they live it.
- ▶ Social epistemology studies this epistemic dependence and how to use it for **maximizing true beliefs** and **maximally reducing the risk of false belief at the same time**.

The problem

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The problem

- ▶ According to Buchanan, subjects' webs of beliefs show a deep epistemic dependence on the society they live in.
- ▶ This epistemic dependence makes them vulnerable to false inculcated beliefs.

An example of false inculcated beliefs

I grew up in the American South during the 1950s and 1960s in a racist family culture embedded in a society of institutionalized racism. Blacks were relegated to separate and inferior schools, were effectively excluded from voting, and could not use the same restrooms, hotels, or restaurants as whites. I was taught, by explicit dogma and by example, to regard blacks as subhuman. [...] I also recall joking with my friends about the "Tucker telephone," a crank-operated dynamo that was used to deliver electrical shocks to the genitals of black inmates of a nearby penal farm.

An example of false inculcated beliefs

Largely through luck, I left this toxic social environment at the age of eighteen and came to understand that the racist world view that had been inculcated in me was built on a web of false beliefs about natural differences between blacks and whites. My first reaction was a bitter sense of betrayal: Those I had trusted and looked up to—my parents, aunts and uncles, pastor, teachers, and local government officials—had been sources of dangerous error, not truth.

An example of false inculcated beliefs

*Socially inculcated false beliefs can not only put one at **moral risk**, they can also endanger one's **well-being**—they can put one at what I shall call **prudential risk**. False beliefs about an international Jewish conspiracy, about the inherent superiority and imperial destiny of the German nation and the infallibility of the Fhrer helped motivate Germans to support policies that resulted in their own deaths by the millions, and in the destruction and division of their country.*

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moral threat Risk of behaving immorally;

prudential threat For example, the risk of perpetrating hate crime.

The problem

For example, consider:

The dark side of this profound epistemic dependence is our vulnerability to socially inculcated false beliefs that put us at grave prudential and moral risk. The proper response to this vulnerability, contrary to Descartes, is not to attempt to free ourselves of the epistemic influence of society. Even if we could do so, the price would be much too high, because we can know so little on our own. Instead, we should attempt to determine which social arrangements are least prone to inculcate, spread, and above all sustain the most damaging false beliefs.

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1. Isolating oneself is not an option, because we can gain so little knowledge on our own.
2. Rather, we should try to find out what is the best political arrangement that reduces the risk of falsely inculcated beliefs.
3. Professor Buchanan believes that certain forms of government **reduce** the risk of falsely inculcated beliefs.

Diagnosis

Although all carry the risk of false belief, some social institutions and practices have greater resources than others for reducing this risk, in part through mechanisms for the correction of false belief. My aim in this article is to argue for certain key liberal institutions on the grounds that they contribute significantly to the reduction of the moral and prudential risks to which we are all vulnerable by virtue of our ineliminable social epistemic dependency, while at the same time allowing us to reap the benefits of a sophisticated and flexible social division of epistemic labor.

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The bulk of the argument

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- ▶ Next he argues that only political liberalism can guarantee that those requirements are satisfied.
- ▶ Hence, he concludes that from the point of view of social epistemology, political liberalism is preferable.

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- ▶ What requirements?

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Second requirement They create and sustain an efficient epistemic division of labor, thus reaping the benefits of reliance on experts and at the same time constrain epistemic reliance on experts;

Epistemically favorable requirements

- First requirement** They allow and encourage the free exchange of true information and ideas;
- Second requirement** They create and sustain an efficient epistemic division of labor, thus reaping the benefits of reliance on experts and at the same time constrain epistemic reliance on experts;
- Third Requirement** Finally, institutions are preferable to the extent that they do a better job of producing, preserving, and transmitting the **most practically important** true beliefs.

Epistemically favorable requirements

Let us look at each of the three requirements in turn.

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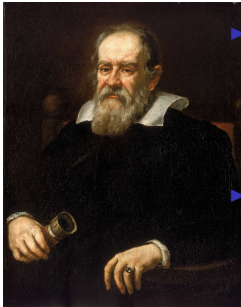
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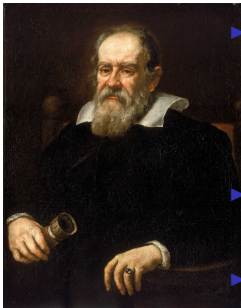
- ▶ Professor Buchanan thinks that it is pretty obvious that freedom (of speech, for example) encourages the exchange of true information and beliefs.
- ▶ Can you think of examples showing that lack of freedom (of speech, for example) may inhibit the exchange of true information and beliefs?

An historical example: Galileo Galilei



- ▶ Galileo Galilei (1564—1642) was an Italian physicist, mathematician, engineer, astronomer, and philosopher who played a major role in the scientific revolution.
- ▶ Galileo's championing of heliocentrism was controversial within his lifetime, a time when most subscribed to either geocentrism or the Tolemaic system.
- ▶ The matter was investigated by the Roman Inquisition in 1615, which concluded that heliocentrism was false and contrary to scripture.

An historical example: Galileo Galilei



- ▶ The outcome was placing works advocating the Copernican system on the index of banned books and forbidding Galileo from advocating heliocentrism.
- ▶ That had the effect of delaying a general appreciation of Galileo's discoveries.
- ▶ That is arguably an example where lack of freedom of speech inhibited the circulation of true scientific beliefs.

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The importance of division of epistemic labor

Social processes and norms that divide labor and identify experts can achieve great epistemic gains, through the greater productivity that the division of labor allows, by enabling individuals to develop special skills for acquiring and transmitting truths, and by reducing the costs to individuals of gaining access to truths.

The danger of deferring to experts

Sometimes the experts are sources of error, even in their domains of expertise, and sometimes we err by relying on them for truths about matters that are not in fact within their domains of expertise. At least two factors encourage experts to make unwarranted claims to epistemic authority. First, to the extent that their being identified as experts enables them to garner control and reap social rewards, they have an interest in convincing us that the domain of their expertise is broader rather than narrower and that the reliability of their judgments is greater than it is.

The danger of deferring to experts

Second, especially when the training or education needed to gain expertise is extensive, individuals who have become experts tend to be committed to and identify with their expertise, to value it so highly as to be prone to exaggerate its usefulness.

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The danger of deferring to experts

I will use 'unwarranted epistemic deference' to cover both (a) excessive trust in the reliability of judgments of an expert that actually are within the expert's domain of expertise and (b) misplaced trust, as when one mistakenly believes an expert to have special knowledge about an area that in fact is not within her domain of expertise.

Expertise and liberalism

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Expertise and liberalism

The crucial point is that where epistemic authority is based chiefly on merit, epistemic efficiency is enhanced through a rational division of labor, and the risks of surplus epistemic deference are reduced. Obviously, this point applies only to the comparison of liberal and nonliberal modern societies, those in which there is an extensive division of labor.

Expertise and liberalism

from the standpoint of social epistemology, what makes the appeal to objective qualifications valuable is that it facilitates a more reliable identification of experts and, with this, a more efficient allocation of epistemic deference. To the extent that liberal societies tend to rely more on the identification of epistemic authorities on the basis of objective qualifications than do nonliberal ones, they can be expected to do a better job, not only of producing more beliefs through a freer exchange of ideas and information, but also of effectively selecting true beliefs from among them.

Different kinds of trust to experts

Status trust **Status trust**, which includes epistemic deference, is accorded to persons or groups simply on the basis of their being identified as having a certain status or of their being a member of a certain group.

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Status trust **Status trust**, which includes epistemic deference, is accorded to persons or groups simply on the basis of their being identified as having a certain status or of their being a member of a certain group.

Merit trust **Merit trust**, in contrast, is individual-performance based; it is conferred on an individual on the basis of an appraisal of her own actions or attributes, so far as they are regarded as exhibiting appropriate qualifications.

Different kinds of trust to experts

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- ▶ Status trust, though helpful at times, may be dangerous.

Buchanan on trust

If one overestimates either one's physician's competence or her commitment to one's health interests, one may accept, as sound, judgments that are not only false, but dangerous to one's health (and one's pocketbook). If one overestimates the reliability of religious or government authorities or teachers, the result may be moral or prudential disaster, or both.

Different kinds of trust to experts

- ▶ Buchanan thinks that in liberal societies, it is more likely for status trust to depend on merit trust—in other words, that one would be given status trust—for example, *qua* physician—just in case one has showed to deserve it.

Status trust and merit trust

in a liberal society, where there is an emphasis on objective qualifications for positions of authority generally, including professional roles, status trust in physicians will largely be a function of the belief that the status of physician is conferred only on individuals who merit trust so far as health care is concerned, because they have undergone a rigorous education and training that confers objective qualifications regarding the provision of health care and that inculcates a sincere commitment to the patient's well-being.

Status trust and merit trust

Status trust, under these conditions, is a kind of indirect merit trust, trust that is derived from beliefs about characteristics of the institutions that confer status.

Questions for discussion

- ▶ Is this argument a principled argument? Or an empirical generalization?

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- ▶ Is this argument a principled argument? Or an empirical generalization?
- ▶ Can you see the difference?

Different kinds of trust to experts

Access to information empowers individuals and groups to combat excessive or misplaced status trust and thereby to avoid the moral and prudential risks they entail. For example, suppose that it becomes common knowledge that physicians who own CAT scan machines order CAT scans two to three times more frequently than those who do not, even when dealing with patients that are medically indistinguishable.

Different kinds of trust to experts

If many other particular instances of physician conflicts of interest become generally known, and if the media make clear that the structure of the private health care delivery system creates powerful financial incentives for physicians to serve corporate interests, then patients may come to doubt their assumption that physicians put their patients' interests first, and this may lead them to be less likely to rely on a physician's judgment simply because she is a physician.

Different kinds of trust to experts

Patients may come to base their epistemic deference more on their beliefs about the actual skills and dedication of a particular physician than upon status.

Buchanan's argument...

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- ▶ Buchanan acknowledges that some modern non liberal societies did allocate status trust on the basis of merit trust (Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union or present-day Saudi Arabia or China);
- ▶ However, he nonetheless thinks that there are at least two features that make non liberal societies less likely to succeed to allocate trust on the basis of merit:

Buchanan's argument

- ▶ First, they tend to obliterate or blur the distinction between the public and private spheres. The larger the domain of the political, the more opportunity there is for party loyalty or ideological purity to usurp the role of objective qualifications.

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- ▶ First, they tend to obliterate or blur the distinction between the public and private spheres. The larger the domain of the political, the more opportunity there is for party loyalty or ideological purity to usurp the role of objective qualifications.
- ▶ Second, it is more difficult to constrain the influence of nonmerit considerations in nonliberal societies, because of the least availability of free circulation of information.