

REASON PAPERS

A Journal of Interdisciplinary Normative Studies

Vol. 41, No. 2

Summer 2020

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Editor's Note

This issue of *Reason Papers* features a symposium on Scott Scheall's *F. A. Hayek and the Epistemology of Politics: The Curious Task of Economics*. We have three authors with three rather different takes on Scheall's book. Aeon Skoble examines how the book points towards what he calls an "almost intractable problem for liberal democracy." Next, Timothy Sandefur argues that Scheall's new book has some of the same problems that Sandefur has previously spied in Hayek. Lastly, Forrest Nabors reads Scheall's book in a broader context of intellectual history from the ancients to the moderns. Nabors interprets Scheall's approach to be at odds with both ancient wisdom and the path chosen by James Madison and the other American founders. As is only fair, our author gets the last word. In his reply, Scheall recapitulates the central arguments of the book before responding to what he argues are misinterpretations and misreadings of the book.

This symposium is valuable in drawing out various fault lines and disagreements about core principles and visions about how best to understand the task and methods of political philosophy. Part of my vision for *Reason Papers* is that it encourages greater dialogue and meaningful exchange of ideas. Symposia such as this one highlight this goal by helping all of us to see some of the fundamental ways in which we disagree. Real dialogue, dialogue that helps us to make intellectual progress, can only start *after* we identify the ideas about which we differ.

Often such dialogue requires some degree of humility or maybe it's modesty? It can be so hard to keep those concepts clear! Thankfully, in his article, William Irwin offers an account of how the concepts of humility and modesty differ and why it is important to keep these start.

We close out this issue with a review of Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt's *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*. Our own book editor Carrie-Ann Biondi takes on the task of reviewing this important diagnosis of many of the problems that plague education and society more generally. Biondi highlights the important themes of the book while also suggesting some further points that the authors missed in their account.

As previously announced online, *Reason Papers* is moving to a symposium-only format. This is to encourage greater dialogue and more meaningful exchanges of ideas. This means, though, that the journal is no longer accepting unsolicited manuscripts. We still have a few articles in the review pipeline, so the Articles section will not disappear quite yet. But we encourage individuals to propose a symposium. In addition, we will continue to publish Book Reviews, so please contact us if you are interested in writing a review.

Shawn E. Klein

Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ

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Symposium: Scott Scheall's *F. A. Hayek and the Epistemology of Politics: The Curious Task of Economics*

Thoughts on Scheall's *F. A. Hayek and the Epistemology of Politics: Whither Democracy?*

Aeon Skoble

Bridgewater State University

Scott Scheall's new book *F. A. Hayek and the Epistemology of Politics* is a fascinating and well-argued exploration of the problems for (mainly democratic) politics that have their basis in knowledge (as opposed to other problems such as bias, corruption, and so on). What follows are some reflections on why his thesis is not only correct, but presents an almost intractable problem for liberal democracy.

Scheall opens the book by stating his thesis that “the problem of political ignorance is logically prior to the problem...of policymaker incentives” (2).¹ The latter problem is generally characterized in terms of the extent to which policymakers are motivated to further the interests of their constituents, as opposed to their own self-interest. In a sense,

¹ Scott Scheall, *F. A. Hayek and the Epistemology of Politics: The Curious Task of Economics* (Abingdon, UK and New York: Routledge, 2020). All references to the book in this symposium are by page numbers in parentheses.

one might think that it has to be in a policymaker's self-interest to serve her constituents, because then they will like her and vote for her at reelection time. But it has been well-established that policymakers are susceptible to sustained lobbying efforts when there are concentrated benefits that accrue to a small group if the costs can be dispersed among a much larger group.² So, a policymaker may find it more advantageous to *seem* to serve her constituents as opposed to *actually* serving their interests, for instance by supporting an agricultural subsidy that costs voters an extra two dollars a year, but delivers a huge payoff to the small subset of constituents who reap the benefit. A policymaker may support a colleague's bill even when many voters do not support the bill, on the grounds that compromise and mutual back-scratching are the only way to get anything done. Obviously, at some point, too much voter dissatisfaction does result in ouster, but the incumbency return rate in the US Congress is over 90%,³ so evidently voters have a high tolerance for this sort of thing. Scheall does not deny the existence of the problem, but is arguing that there is another, more fundamental problem, which he calls the problem of political ignorance: "Even if policymakers were motivated to pursue only their constituents' interests, nothing would ensure that they know either what those interests are or how to realize goals associated with them" (2). In other words, were we to somehow solve the motivation problem, and found ourselves in a world where policymakers always and only tried to act in their constituents' interests, they would not know either (a) what their constituents' interests *are*, or (b) what policies would in fact help to realize those interests. His case for this is persuasive, so my contribution to this symposium is not adversarial but rather an attempt to explore some of the meanings and ramifications of this. I have two sets of thoughts on this which follow from his set up: 1, policymakers are generally incapable of knowledge about what their constituents' interests are, and 2, policymakers would be generally incapable of knowledge about how to realize those interests even when they do know them.

² See, for example, Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action* (Harvard University Press, 1965).

³ Huckabee, David C. "Reelection Rates of House Incumbents: 1790-1994." Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 1995.

1. People don't know their own interests, so they can't communicate that to their representatives

At his trial, Socrates noted that most of the people of Athens valued wealth and fame more than virtue, and suggested that this was a mistake.⁴ They think wealth and fame will bring them happiness, but if they neglect virtue, they will find themselves unhappy nevertheless. The broader point is that “what I want” and “what is in my best interests” may not be the same thing. For example, if Tom is a heroin addict, what he wants (more heroin) is *not* in his best interests. Socrates' charge is that many people don't engage in a sufficient level of self-reflection to even have a good sense of their own interests. This can lead them to support policies which are actively contrary to their own best interests, or to pursue short-term gains at the expense of long-term well-being. If I don't even know what my best interest is, I can hardly communicate it to my representative. To make matters worse, to the extent that I would even attempt to communicate my interest to my representative, I would not be thinking “I have no idea what my interests are,” but rather would assume I did know (much as the Athenians assumed they were correct in pursuing wealth and fame). So while I might be correctly communicating what I take to be my interests, I could just as easily be delivering a message *directly contrary to my interests*.

2. Where (1) isn't a problem, voters suffer from the same ignorance as policymakers, so they don't know what ask for

Assume for the sake of argument that Socrates overestimates how little self-knowledge people have, and that they do know their own interests. Obviously people *can* know their own values, but they don't always know how those values translate into law or policy, so they often do not know their own interests in the politically-relevant way. For example, say Susan engages in self-reflection and concludes that she genuinely does value safe communities. What is it she can communicate to her representatives? In a political context, the value “safe communities” needs to be translated into some law or policy by her representative. No one is lobbying explicitly for unsafe communities. So the question becomes, what laws or policies will produce safe

⁴ Plato, *Apology*, in *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, ed. John Cooper, tr. G.M.A. Grube (Hackett, 2000).

communities? Scheall suggests (correctly) that policymakers will typically not have sufficient knowledge to answer that question, but note also that the average voter doesn't either. All the reasons why a policymaker will be ignorant in Scheall's sense will be true for voters as well. Susan may think that the best way to attain safe communities is to have heavily armed, aggressive police forces, and this may be the reason why Susan's representative pushes for policies that bring that about. Or Susan may have no idea at all what laws and policies will foster safe communities. If Susan doesn't know how to translate her values into policy, she cannot communicate her interests (in the relevant sense) to her representatives.

3. Where (1) and (2) aren't problems, how are policymakers to aggregate diverse preferences among their constituents?

Assume for the sake of argument (and contrary to Scheall's hypothesis) that Susan and Bob are both self-reflective people who have a good sense of their own values and both invest enough time and energy into thinking about which policies best secure their interests. They may have very different values and interests, so when we talk about policymakers having knowledge of their constituents' interests, even under ideal circumstances this may mean "knowing" that their constituents want P and not-P. If Susan sincerely wants to continue the war and Bob sincerely wants to end the war, the policymaker is literally incapable of working towards both of their interests. Even if we restrict our consideration of this to epistemology: Susan believes P and Bob believes not-P, but the policymaker *cannot* believe P and not-P. So the policymaker cannot know her constituents' interests. One might object that the policymaker *can* know that Susan believes P and Bob believes not-P, or more generally that 37% of her constituents believe P, or at least say they do, concerns (1) and (2) notwithstanding, but this presupposes that the sampling was representative and valid, that the respondents were honest, that the survey question was well-formulated, and so on. Scheall mentions Arrow's Theorem⁵; this is one of many

⁵ Scheall notes on p. 26 that Kenneth Arrow "shows that, given a few fairly plausible assumptions, no voting system can translate individual preferences into a univocal preference ranking for the entire community." The reference is to Kenneth Arrow, "A Difficulty in the Concept of Social Welfare," *Journal of Political Economy* 58 (1950), pp. 328-346.

problems in policymakers' ability to aggregate preferences and be said to know their constituents' interests. So we have good reason to doubt that policymakers can have knowledge of their constituent's interests. Scheall's account of policymaker ignorance works synergistically with the motivation problem – policymakers have an incentive to remain ignorant because it immunizes them. They can have the motivations they have *because* they are ignorant. If her constituents either do not really know, or cannot adequately articulate, their own interests, then the policymaker can more easily feel justified in working towards either her own interests directly or towards the interests of the strongest lobby. Why work harder at acquiring knowledge of my constituents' interests if this is unknowable? This seems to presuppose that the policymaker *knows* that she is ignorant, but actually this conclusion follows either way. If she doesn't know that she doesn't know, she will still fail to acquire that knowledge. At best she can attempt to aggregate what seem to be the most vocally expressed preferences, and as the knowledge problem bleeds into the motivation problem, the distinction will not amount to anything.

Of course, Scheall makes the further point, which is surely correct, that policymakers would be generally incapable of knowledge about how to realize those interests even if they could know them. The title of the book mentions Hayek, who famously explained⁶ how tacit and dispersed knowledge cannot be aggregated by a single planner. An interesting ramification of Scheall's argument is the way the Hayekian knowledge problem applies both to policymakers' ability to know what their constituents' interests are *as well as* how to realize those interests even when they've been approximated. Policymakers can also be hindered in this regard by their weakness in predicting unintended consequences. If the policymaker perceives (rightly or wrongly) that most voters want laws that promote automobile safety, she may, in the classic example, push for seatbelt laws that inadvertently cause an *increase* in injuries due to drivers being more careless as a result of thinking they're safer.⁷

⁶ F. A. Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society," *The American Economic Review* 35, no. 4 (1945).

⁷ E.g., Sam Peltzman, "The Effects of Automobile Safety Regulation," *Journal of Political Economy* 83 (1975), pp. 677-726.

4. The Problems for Liberal Democracy

But even just taking by itself the thesis about policymakers being incapable of knowing constituents' interests, Scheall presents a serious problem for supporters of liberal democracy. The basic idea of liberal democracy is that policymakers are responsive to the interests of the people they represent. Direct democracy wouldn't solve the problem, because then there's even less reliability in aggregating diverse preferences, for the reasons Arrow discusses as well as the inability of pure majoritarianism to account for minority interests (Scheall 151-152). The point of adopting representative democracy is to streamline deliberation – difficult enough among 435 people, but literally impossible among hundreds of millions. But the representatives' ability to represent presupposes information about their constituents' interests. If this is impossible to know, we might need to reconceive of representative democracy. The policymakers might be said, for instance, to represent ideas or positions rather than voters. But how would voters who ex hypothesi do not know which policies will realize their values know which representatives to vote for? The problem can't be removed by rebranding. Another alternative is to embrace a robust paternalism in which policymakers make a specific point of not caring what their constituents say, substituting their own judgment unreservedly. There are at least two objections to this. First, it would not be particularly liberal, nor even particularly democratic, to have the policymakers' decision-making be completely divorced from their constituents' expressed interests. And second, as Scheall suggests, the policymakers would *still* lack knowledge of how to best realize these new constituent-independent goals.

A third alternative would be to greatly minimize the scope of what policymakers make policy about. In conditions of persistent ignorance, perhaps it would be better not to take it upon yourself to make a decision that binds others. A trial and error process which facilitated discovery would be more effective than stumbling around in the dark guessing. Hayek's point about prices serving as a knowledge substitute can apply here as well. Just as top-down management of a market makes it unable to function as an actual market, perhaps it's also true that the more top-down management a polity has, the less it can function as a polity. Substituting the pretense of knowledge when the real thing is

unavailable is not an effective way to get good results. Just as we get better economic results when we let the pricing system work on its own, perhaps we would get better political results if we were to leave the polity free to work on its own. There's something of a paradox if we apply Scheall's thesis to *this*; namely, policymaker (and voter) ignorance also imply that we don't know how to get to the sort of polity I'm suggesting. But what I'm suggesting is a direct response to the implications of the ignorance thesis, whereas alternatives presuppose ignoring it. Of course I cannot provide a roadmap for delivering my preferred set of political institutions, but this is true for political philosophy generally. All we can do is make suggestions based on evidence and arguments, and hope they gain traction. The substitutes for pretense-of-knowledge policymaking would include greater openness of market transactions, with remedies for disputes in common-law or arbitration. We don't have to know in advance how we're all going to live together, which is good, since it turns out we cannot know this anyway. A much smaller set of ground rules, combined with trial-and-error discovery processes and bottom-up dispute resolution, would obviate most of the work that Scheall argues (correctly) gets done largely in ignorance of its subject.

Think Inside the Box

Timothy Sandefur

Goldwater Institute

Scott Scheall has done an admirable job of making the occasionally dry and complicated issues of Hayekian political theory readable and even amusing. And he shows that he is an attentive student of Friedrich Hayek, particularly in the emphasis he places on epistemic humility which is certainly Hayek's own principal teaching. But the result of Scheall's skillful presentation is to lay bare just how flimsy that teaching really is as a guide to political wisdom, shorn of a normative framework.

1. Constructed vs. spontaneous orders

The major difficulty in applying Hayek's distinction between constructed and spontaneous orders to any practical policy discussion is that there is no *qualitative* distinction between the two.¹ When examined up close, every spontaneous order turns out to be comprised of constructed orders, and when seen from a distance, every constructed order turns out to be just one ingredient in an ongoing process of spontaneous ordering (and is also itself made up of smaller spontaneous orders). It is tempting, of course, to use a factor such as *the presence of coercion* to qualitatively differentiate constructed from spontaneous orders, or political decision-making from private decision-

¹ Timothy Sandefur, "Some Problems with Spontaneous Order," *The Independent Review* 14, no. 1 (2009), pp. 5-25.

making, but Hayek himself does not do this,² and Scheall cannot, because that would be a normative consideration, and pursuant to his argument we must confine ourselves to epistemological factors only, at least for present purposes (e.g., 19) which would be out of bounds.³

Hayekian spontaneity is only a useful concept of *observational* political taxonomy. It is basically the theory of evolution. But that means it is useless as a guide to action. Darwin cannot purport to tell any particular lion whether to eat any particular antelope, because if the lion does eat the antelope, that serves the process of evolution, and if the lion does not eat the antelope, that, too, serves the process of evolution. For the same reason, a policymaker who does P is playing his part in the spontaneous order of society, and the policymaker who does not-P is also playing his part in the spontaneous order of society, and so is a policymaker who does Q.

Scheall hopes we might “learn more about how to divide the class of potential policy ends between those that can be deliberately realized via political action and those that can be realized, if at all, only if spontaneous forces intervene” (173), but the fact that there is no qualitative difference between spontaneous and constructed orders means that any such hope is futile. There are no *exclusively* political actions or *exclusively* spontaneous forces; even on a collective farm in a totalitarian communist state, the actual work of weeding the tomato beds still consists of spontaneous decisions by Comrade Farmer—and even the voluntary decision of a stockbroker in Galt’s Gulch to buy copper instead of gold depends on prices that reflect whether or not the People’s State of Mexico has nationalized the San Sebastián mines. Because spontaneous and constructed orders are in principle

² Hayek acknowledged that there was no principled distinction between spontaneous and constructed order, and—with notable equivocations—admitted that this means his distinction provides no foundation for a normative argument against constructed, or in favor of spontaneous, orders (or vice versa). Then, in a notable self-contradiction, he (correctly) declared that we must impose constructed, normative values on spontaneous orders. Friedrich Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty Vol. 1: Rules and Order*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 89.

³ Scott Scheall, *F. A. Hayek and the Epistemology of Politics: The Curious Task of Economics* (Abingdon, UK and New York: Routledge, 2020). All references to the book in this symposium are by page numbers in parentheses.

inextricable, it is impossible *in principle* to distinguish between matters on which political means will be effective, and matters that should be left to spontaneous forces.

Hayek—and Scheall—are biased in favor of spontaneous ordering, and against constructed ordering, but that bias cannot be justified on *purely epistemological* grounds. There are two possible ways of attempting to do so, but neither work: First, perhaps some goals are only within the reach of spontaneous but not constructed ordering. This is untenable because the lack of any *qualitative* distinction between spontaneous and constructed ordering makes it impossible to determine this. Imagine a conscientious Hayekian legislator trying to decide how to address the problem of street crime. Should he choose a constructed order—i.e., regular foot-patrols by policemen enforcing a “broken windows” policy? Or should he choose a spontaneous order?—i.e., leaving it to vigilante groups to duke it out for themselves? It is impossible to answer this question *purely* on the basis of epistemology. Because spontaneous and constructed orders cannot be differentiated in principle, whatever answer he chooses will necessarily involve an interaction between both, and *either* will be plausibly describable as spontaneous or constructed. Even if the legislator implements a rigid police state, with checkpoints and random searches of pedestrians, the officers involved will rely on tips from local informants and their own knowledge of neighborhoods—thereby incorporating spontaneous elements into what appears to be a textbook example of a constructed order.

We cannot draw the proposed line based on policymaker ignorance, either, given that citizens are ignorant, too, and their ignorance is not comparable to that of policymakers. Policymakers know more, let us say, about a neighboring nation’s secret military buildup and plans for invasion—whereas local citizens know more about domestic food supplies, manpower shortages, and national morale. Both groups also know a little about all these things, and neither knows what the other knows or doesn’t know. So if we confine ourselves to epistemological considerations alone, it can never be clear which group is in the best position to decide whether to go to war.⁴

⁴ This issue came up in the late 1930s, in debates over the Ludlow Amendment, which would have required a national referendum to declare war except in case

And war is a relatively clean example. On matters of economic regulation or environmental protection, it is truly impossible on purely epistemological grounds to specify a category where policymakers, in Scheall's phrase, "know enough" or a category on which citizens "know enough" (20). Therefore this first possible basis for justifying a pro-spontaneity bias must fail.

Second, perhaps spontaneous orders are more fragile than constructed orders, and *require* non-interference, whereas constructed orders are more robust and can exist even in a world of pervasive state interference. But is this true? The history of black markets suggests that, on the contrary, spontaneous ordering is *extremely* robust. And constructed ordering can be quite fragile, liable to obstruction either by spontaneous forces or by other, competing constructed orders. (Witness the entire history of the New Deal.) Remember that constructed orders are constructed out of spontaneous orders, and spontaneous orders grow up spontaneously around constructed orders, in a dynamic back-and-forth process. That means it is not obvious—absent introduction of a normative principle—that we should presume in favor of allowing spontaneous orders to flourish. In fact, we do the opposite all the time—taking steps to prevent spontaneous orders from developing in response to constructed ones. We call this "closing loopholes." We do it for *normative* reasons—not reasons of political epistemology.

2. The paralysis of ignorance

Of course, the Hayekian believes that the reason for presuming in favor of spontaneity is that spontaneous ordering allows for the use of local knowledge, so policymakers should presume in favor of spontaneity in light of their own limitations. But here another problem arises: there is no point at which ignorance entirely vanishes.⁵ Hayek's

of actual invasion. Opponents emphasized that government officials are privy to important secret intelligence about other nations and must therefore be trusted with the question of war; advocates argued that the people are in a better position to know the national circumstances and that they should enjoy that power.

⁵ It might seem an exaggeration to say that under Hayek's knowledge problem

observation that no central planner can know or make use of all of the information necessary to organize an economy applies not only to the complexity of large-scale social problems considered in the abstract—it is, more importantly, an indictment of attempts to control *dynamic* social phenomena. Even if it were possible for Laplace’s Demonic Bureaucrat to know at one instant every factor that goes into an industry, and all the economic consequences of its behaviors, he would nevertheless be paralyzed by the fact that all that information will be obsolete tomorrow. What’s more, every action consists of an infinite number of sub-actions, so that like Zeno’s Paradox, any constructed order can be infinitely subdivided along the axis of time or any number of other axes—and questions of ignorance arise at every stage.

That is why rigid adherence to such a guideline as “look before you leap” or “don’t interfere with spontaneous orders” would, if consistently followed, lead to paralysis. No action the state could ever undertake could be justified on that basis, or even comprehended to begin with. We obviously do not and cannot act only when we have perfect knowledge of the consequences of our actions. Yet we *must* act.

Scheall says that “even a pure do-nothing policy bears an epistemic burden when it is intended to manifest particular results” (164). True! But he adds—and rightly so, on his premises—that a policymaker who aims to pursue such a do-nothing policy must “know [before not acting] that there are no hindrances in the environment to the effective operation of spontaneous forces” (164). This is impossible, for two reasons. First, because of the knowledge problem: the economy is too complex to know what will end up hindering the operation of spontaneous forces; if that were possible, the forces would not be spontaneous. Second, any such “hindrances” are themselves presumably the result either of a spontaneous order—and should, *ex hypothesi*, be preserved—or of constructed orders, which, again, are simply comprised of spontaneous orders (which, again, should be preserved). To wipe them away without at least a full—and

argument, ignorance must entirely vanish before the state can act, but given that spontaneous orders are merely aggregates of constructed orders, and that constructed orders are built out of spontaneous orders, that does seem to be what his argument would demand. See my “sidewalk” example in Sandefur, “Some Problems with Spontaneous Order,” p. 8.

unattainable—account of their role and consequences “cannot succeed” (xi).

Given Hayek’s neutrality—or vacillation⁶—with regard to the legitimacy of spontaneous versus constructed orders, one wonders whether it is even viable to use the pejorative term “hindrances” at all. Spontaneous orders, *by their very existence as orders*, “hinder” spontaneity, and lead to the development of different orders than would have existed in their absence. This is not a bad thing—it’s just how spontaneity works—but using the term “hindrance” prejudices us by implying that there is some qualitative distinction between a universe of pure spontaneity and a universe of pure construction. But that would be what Scheall calls “floating in the air” (6). The reality is that constructed orders swiftly inspire spontaneous developments,⁷ and spontaneous orders routinely serve as foundations for constructed orders.⁸

Let us clarify this point with an example of recent vintage: how should restaurants in a community stricken by a highly contagious, deadly respiratory disease, reopen after an initial “lockdown” period? The governor of my (and Scheall’s) home state of Arizona issued an executive order that took heed of Hayek’s advice: it required businesses to establish rules for operating safely, and expressly prohibited cities and counties from adopting local ordinances that mandated standards of their own.⁹ In other words, the Governor left it to the business community to design its own rules by reference to its specific capacities and needs (i.e., a spontaneous order, taking advantage of local knowledge) by shielding businesses from the almost instinctual desire of local politicians to interfere by creating and mandating their own rules out of thin air (i.e., a constructed order suffering from the knowledge problem).¹⁰

⁶ Sandefur, “Some Problems with Spontaneous Order,” pp. 11-12.

⁷ For example, panhandlers who stand on freeway offramps, or the entire tax preparation services industry.

⁸ For example, laws regulating ride-sharing.

⁹ Arizona Executive Order 2020-43 (June 29, 2020).

¹⁰ I am simplifying for purposes of argument; in fact, Gov. Ducey’s order required businesses to comply with federal and state government guidelines for sanitation and therefore probably cannot be fairly described as allowing a *truly*

Now, suppose that, following Scheall's recommendation, the Governor's office looked for a "hindrance" before announcing this policy. One that comes to mind is existing anti-discrimination legislation that prohibits restaurants from checking customers for signs of illness or requiring them to wear facemasks.¹¹ What should be done? It's tempting to regard such laws as obstacles to the development of a spontaneous solution to a policy problem, and to sweep them away with some magical Repeal Wand. But that would be fallacious.

First, relative to the Governor's order, these laws are *not* hindrances. They are simply background factors around which the spontaneous order must grow, no different from other factors, such as the price of beef or the location of the nearest interstate. Second, these laws, while "constructed," are also aggregates of spontaneous orders—that is to say, legislators wrote them in light of the then-existing common law rules governing liability and discrimination. So waving the Repeal Wand would *itself* be a form of "constructivism"—and if the Governor were to wave it, the consequences would be far-reaching, potentially infinite. If that obligates¹² the policymaker to have a theory about the consequences, and of the consequences of those consequences, etc., then it would be impossible to act. Repealing the antidiscrimination laws would, let us say, destroy the business of lawyers who make a living suing restaurants. That would harm the businesses of accountants who do the payroll for those law firms. That would hurt the baker and the glazier and the tailor—in a sort of "little old lady who swallowed the fly" cascade that would necessarily paralyze any policymaker before he gets started. And, as Scheall says, the same considerations also apply to decisions *not* to act.

Scheall offers two answers to this objection. "Given the experientially contingent and culturally conditioned nature of the success or failure of different social institutions," there is no One Best

spontaneous order.

¹¹ Walter Olson, "Temperature Checks at Businesses: Sued if You Do, Sued if You Don't," *Cato at Liberty*, May 20, 2020, <https://www.cato.org/blog/temperature-checks-businesses-sued-you-do-sued-you-dont>.

¹² Again, note the oddity of discussing "obligation" at a point in the argument where we are purposely withholding any normative considerations.

Way to design social institutions, and therefore no need for a clear line here; rather, we muddle through the complexity of political decision-making as best we can in light of the wisdom to go slowly, with incremental improvements (172). Also, Scheall says, the objection is ill-formed because the question is not where to draw the line, but where *not* to draw it: “In particular, to the extent that we care about realizing our goals, we should avoid assigning goals to policymaking that are more effectively realized spontaneously, and we should avoid leaving goals to spontaneous forces that are more effectively realized via policymaking” (173).

But here we crash into the barrier we have tried so hard to avoid: normativity. Scheall says that “empirical political epistemology is non-normative” (172), and that we should address “ought” only after “can.” The attempt at prioritizing the epistemological over the normative must fail, however. It is not possible to determine whether our “goals” can be more effectively realized spontaneously or some other way (Scheall’s second proposed answer) without having “goals” to start with, and goals are by definition normative.¹³ Nor can we muddle through (Scheall’s first proposed answer) without having *some* normative goal, given that policymaking virtually always aims not at a single goal but at some acceptable tradeoff between several competing goals. In reopening restaurants, we seek to ensure that consumers get food, that they are safe, that restaurant owners can make a living, etc.—and we draw lines in light of those purposes. If “in order to determine the better and worse ways for a society to delineate the public and private realms—the demarcations that ‘work’ more or less well for the society and its members—requires extensive empirical and historical analysis” (172), then what guides that analysis? It is not possible to answer that question without crossing into the normative.

¹³ Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). It also seems unlikely that political epistemology can be non-normative at all. There must be at least some meta-ethical stage at which we ask whether we should devote our time to political epistemology in the first place, and that question is itself normative. Epistemology itself is shot through with normative considerations, as well. Paul W. Ludwig, “Public Spiritedness.” *Claremont Review of Books*. 20, no. 2 (Spring 2020), <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/public-spiritedness/>; J. Bronowski, *Science and Human Values* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011 [1965]).

3. The costs of finding the limits of the epistemic

This is problematic because Scheall's entire project is an attempt to shift away from contentious normative considerations back to what he views as the logically prior question of epistemology: *is the project possible?* before *should we attempt it?* But this seems overly tidy.

For one thing, there is the problem of "unknown unknowns" (180). We are often blind to our own ignorance, and this is probably where we are most vulnerable. Yet while Scheall refers to this "second-order ignorance" problem (3, 27-28), he makes no attempt to discuss it in depth, and that is troubling, given that it is both impossible for a policymaker *ever* to be fully aware of his own ignorance, and because of the crying-wolf hazard that occurs if we too frequently invoke it. While every conscientious policymaker is aware of his own fallibility, he cannot be expected to await perfect knowledge before acting.

Second-order ignorance is *always* with us. As a consequence, policymakers will *have* to act at some point, despite being consciously aware of the shadow of second-order ignorance. Indeed, there are times when it is better to leap before looking, even when doing so imposes extraordinary costs. Policymakers who hesitate in times of crisis, out of fear of their own second-order ignorance, are often poor leaders. Isn't that what General George McClellan is best remembered for? And to insist too often in discussions with policymakers that there might be *some* unknown detail they failed to consider—one they cannot possibly have considered, since it is by definition beyond their horizon—is more likely to render them deaf to such warnings in the future than to make them more hesitant. As *Federalist* No. 25 warns, we should be:

cautious about fettering government with restrictions that cannot be observed, because [we] know that every breach of the fundamental laws, though dictated by necessity, impairs that sacred reverence which ought to be maintained in the breast of rulers toward the constitution of a country, and forms

a precedent for other breaches where the same plea of necessity does not exist at all, or is less urgent and palpable.¹⁴

Also, determining our epistemic limits requires us to take steps, and those steps would presumably have to satisfy our criteria for taking steps. How should we decide whether to devote resources to the problem of figuring out what our limits are? The way Scheall has framed the dilemma creates an unjustifiable one-way ratchet in the direction of more and more constructive policymaking. If we must determine the limits of our knowledge before taking any policy step, this will militate in *every* case in favor of more epistemological analysis and research, and more centralization on *that* question, at every iteration. Absent any possibility of taking the path of spontaneity on *this* matter—and there is none in Scheall’s argument—policymakers who are trying to decide whether to devote more resources to measuring their epistemological capacities must first determine their capacity to answer *that* question, and then *that* question—and the answer will always be yes. They will spiral in favor of more and more research into epistemological capacities, which would mean ever-growing investigation and surveillance powers for the government, and full employment for think-tankers. (Lucky for us!) This is particularly true, given that the set of “unknown unknowns” will necessarily include the subset of *unknowable* unknowns—things we can *never* know, but whose unknowability cannot be determined in advance. This suggests an infinite regress that will keep lawmakers doing their homework in perpetuity—on the taxpayer’s dime.

4. The intertwining of the normative and epistemological

But differentiating between normative and epistemological seems problematic anyway, given that in policymaking, the relationship between the two is highly interactive.¹⁵ We do not cleanly

¹⁴ Benjamin Wright, ed., *The Federalist*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1996), p. 213.

¹⁵ Scheall’s introspective argument (21-22) seems to give insufficient weight to improvement, or the role of aspiration, which play important roles in normative considerations. It may be true that nobody “seriously considers as an option marrying an extraterrestrial alien spouse” (21), but a great many young men put

ask first whether a political solution is possible, and then whether it is right; instead we are born into a world of existing policies, and seek to shift toward preferable ones while invariably straddling the fuzzy line between epistemological and normative. On one hand, epistemological barriers can often be overcome by the investment of resources, but that would divert resources from addressing other social problems. We could presumably find a cure for cancer if we cancelled all social programs, disbanded the military, confiscated all private wealth, and devoted all that money to cancer research. But would that be the *right* thing to do? On the other hand, we cannot know all the costs even of policies that are indisputably justified—we might save people from the onrushing trolley, only to learn later that one of them is the next Hitler—but that epistemological limit surely cannot bar us from doing what is right given our present knowledge.

Scheall suggests that the constitution should restrict policymakers to addressing only those matters within their competency. But there are three problems here. First, it is unclear how exactly they can do this, beset as they will invariably be by the kinds of incentives Scheall mentions (168-69). If “approval, popularity, praise, power, whatever,” is likely to push policymakers into erroneously evaluating the costs and benefits of do-nothing versus do-something strategies, then how much likelier are they to correctly evaluate their own epistemological capacities—even if that were a static, objectively determinable matter, instead of the dynamic, moving target that it really is? A thorough discussion of second-order ignorance would address this problem, but is absent from Scheall’s analysis.

Second, in real life, policymakers—i.e., legislators—have an answer to offer: administrative agencies. Policymakers deputize

up posters of Bar Rafaeli in the secret belief that they might marry *her* some day. The blues musician B.B. King once said his distinctive guitar style resulted from his failed efforts to mimic the musicians he admired. “If I could have played identically like [T-Bone Walker or Blind Lemon Jefferson] I would have,” he said. But “[I] have stupid fingers that just don’t work.” Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *The B.B. King Reader* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Corp., 2005), p. 121. To put the point less jocularly, normative thinking less often consists of evaluating our realistic options and more often of projecting an ideal—even if unlikely or even impossible—in front of us, and then striving our best to attain it. See, e.g., Matthew 5:48.

experts and take advantage of their expertise while shielding them from political responsibility so they can impose their expert judgment with the broadest possible discretion. Remaining firmly in the non-normative, epistemological world, the solution would seem to be an infinite number of sub-agencies, and sub-sub-agencies, so as to bring more and more local knowledge to bear on more and more problems. This is, of course, just another name for totalitarianism.

In real life, the results of the Administrative State have not been amenable to political liberty, to say the least. Yet it seems essentially immune from Scheall's argument that the constitution should "limit [legislators'] policy options to those pursuits with respect to which their epistemic capacities are sufficient to make a positive contribution and keep them away from policy pursuits with respect to which their epistemic capacities are inadequate" (175). Few doubt that agencies are, on the whole, staffed by competent and public-spirited people.¹⁶ The question, rather, is one of goals—that is, the inherently normative issue of whether it is right to, e.g., deprive people of their property rights in the manner that the EPA routinely does, a question that involves not just the morality of inflicting violence on individual persons, but the costs and benefits of the whole bureaucratic enterprise, relative to the other things the state could be doing with public resources.¹⁷

¹⁶ It is not accurate to say that public choice theorists "make the assumed knavery of policymakers the *sine qua non* of their analyses" (17). On the contrary, public choice insights hold true of the far more common situation in which there is no simple right answer to a policy question, and in which unconscious biases prevail. Anyone who has dealt with administrative agencies in real life knows that they are staffed by human beings, some highly competent, most fully committed to doing what they genuinely think best. "But the Constitution recognizes higher values than speed and efficiency. Indeed, one might fairly say of the Bill of Rights in general, and the Due Process Clause in particular, that they were designed to protect the fragile values of a vulnerable citizenry from the overbearing concern for efficiency and efficacy that may characterize praiseworthy government officials no less, and perhaps more, than mediocre ones." *Stanley v. Illinois*, 405 U.S. 645, 656 (1972).

¹⁷ Moreover, the risks of creating such an agency of experts are precisely those identified by the public choice school: they facilitate rent-seeking and the redistribution of wealth and opportunity to those who have most influence with the experts. Scheall says such considerations "place the normative cart before

5. Political epistemology cannot stand on its own

This brings us to the third, and bottom-line problem: Scheall does not persuade us that it is possible or even desirable to try to separate political epistemology from normative considerations, even if doing so is only a matter of priorities. He says that

by itself, empirical political epistemology is non-normative; in isolation, it implies nothing about the best form of government or about how we ought to draw the line between government planning and individual planning. Nonetheless...[w]hen the question is which goals we should assign to policymakers and which goals should be left to individuals...it is important to determine what policymakers can and cannot deliberately achieve, a determination that can be made only through empirical political epistemology (172-73).

That is certainly true, but there is no apparent reason why that determination should—or how it *can*—be separated from normative debates. On the contrary, normative considerations should enter into *every* stage of political discussion, because every means is itself an end, and each end requires justification, and also because our technical capacities cannot substitute for—perhaps should not even be a factor in—our normative deliberations. *Can* we solve the grain shortage by liquidating the kulaks? Probably. *Should* that be within the realm of consideration? It probably degrades our liberal institutions even to

the epistemic horse” because “they consider how policymakers *ought* to behave without first asking what policymakers *know* (or *can learn*) *enough* to do” (17). But at least in this example, that is not true: the deputizing of experts *does* address Scheall’s epistemic horse—and then leaves us with a rent-seeking problem on our hands. In any event, whatever the logical priority of these considerations, the cart is still there, and must be pulled.

spend resources calculating whether such things are doable,¹⁸ at a minimum because making that calculation will *itself* require the use of resources that would be better devoted to other ends.

A superior approach to all of this is offered by Lon Fuller, who distinguishes between “managerial direction” and “contract” as principles of social ordering—a distinction more helpful than Hayek’s spontaneous/constructed distinction, in part because it is drawn *within* the framework of normative values.¹⁹ In other words, Fuller, like most classical liberals, addresses questions of political structure only *after* addressing the broader questions of what the state is for, what the limits of its legitimacy are, etc. This reaps all the benefits of Hayek’s knowledge and spontaneity discussions without falling into the traps mentioned here.

Scheall seems to summarily dismiss this possibility in his excessively brief and regrettably confused reference to natural rights (79). The role of natural rights theory in classical liberalism is to focus political attention on things the state *should* do. We address first what is legitimate, and only then consider practical questions of how to accomplish legitimate goals. But Scheall hastily dismisses this possibility, in a manner that mischaracterizes natural rights and creates a straw man argument.

The word “natural” in the phrase “natural rights” refers to the fact that these are principles that depend for their validity on qualities of human nature, as opposed to deriving their validity from social convention. Are there such rights? Maybe not, but if they do exist, that is what they are. Scheall, however, says natural rights are “all well and good given circumstances conducive to mutual respect between persons,” and are “less ‘natural’ under circumstances the inhabitants of which have never known such a conception” (79). This is an incoherent statement, akin to saying “principles of proper physical exercise are all well and good given circumstances conducive to

¹⁸ A point beautifully illustrated in Mark Twain’s satirical “Cannibalism in the Cars” in *Mark Twain, Sketches New and Old* (New York: Harper & Bros, 1903), pp. 370-83.

¹⁹ Kenneth I. Winston, ed., *The Principles of Social Order: Selected Essays of Lon L. Fuller* (Oxford: Hart Publishing 2001), pp. 81-141.

jogging, but are less ‘natural’ if people just sit on the couch all day.” In reality, the “circumstances” have no bearing on the (purported) truth value of the principles involved in natural rights claims. One might deny that there *are* such principles, or that such claims are valid, but one cannot refute them by mischaracterizing them or assuming away their claim to objectivity with the use of scare-quotes.

Scheall goes on to say that “a system of natural rights...might have manifested something like an effective liberal order in 18th-century America; it is less obvious what might have followed from a system of natural rights instituted in, say, a community in the path of the 13th-century Mongol horde” (79). Obviously it’s never “obvious” how any culture will react to any proposition—how would 13th century Mongolians have “manifested” such propositions as “smoking is bad for you,” or “a good driver always checks his mirrors,” or “putting aluminum foil in the microwave is dangerous”? But this is irrelevant to the truth value of such statements. Like these prescriptions, natural rights theory offers propositions about the best ordering of a political society to achieve human flourishing; the truth value of these propositions does not depend upon culture.²⁰ Shifting from their truth value to their cultural settings is a rhetorical sleight of hand that conceals a “naturalistic fallacy” on Scheall’s part; or, as Jefferson put it in a slightly different context, he mistakes the abusive for the natural state of humanity.²¹

Scheall’s disregard for natural rights theory is especially unfortunate, because it is unnecessary. His own theory appears to include all the ingredients of a natural rights theory.²² His entire argument appears to be: there are *natural* limits on human knowledge and capacities, so *if we want to attain a goal*, we are *required* to act in certain ways. But natural law/natural rights theory²³ says no more than

²⁰ In other words, if natural rights theory is valid, then the result of faithfully applying them in 13th century Mongolia would have been a flourishing economy and a healthy and happy populace and the saving of many lives.

²¹ Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Samuel Kercheval (July 12, 1816) in Joyce Appleby & Terence Ball, eds., *Jefferson: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 215.

²² Cf. H.L.A. Hart, *The Concept of Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), pp. 189-95.

²³ The difference between natural law and natural rights is too complex to

this. It asserts normative claims by understanding human flourishing and prescribing constraints on the state's actions in light of that understanding.²⁴ This is normative, but it is not *more* normative than Scheall's approach—given his repeated references to “goals” that we want to “attain”—and what makes it “natural” is the fact that it is (or purports to be) independent of culture, just as Scheall's approach is (or purports to be). It would be irrational for a reader to brush off Scheall's argument by saying, “who knows how this so-called ‘political epistemology’ would have manifested itself in 13th century Mongolia?” He would doubtless reply to a person who engaged in such a straw man argument that knowledge problems existed in that time and place just as they do in ours, because they are a function of human nature, and that his theory therefore holds regardless. The same is true for rights.

What do we hope to gain by avoiding the normative in politics? Do we think we can evade the intensity and complexity of debates about justice and morality, and fashion a plug-and-play political philosophy that will be accepted regardless of what people think about the good? Or have we surrendered to the idea that normative debates are unresolvable and irrational because they have no truth value at all? Whatever the motive, the effort seems not worth the candle. As for the first, attempting such a thing would initially require getting one's audience to accept relativism—which, at a minimum, means talking them out of their existing normative commitments. That seems to call for twice as much labor as just straightforwardly arguing that their moral views are wrong. As to the notion that normativity is necessarily subjective, that is simply false.²⁵ True, arguments about

address here, and not relevant for our purposes. Fuller emphasized the distinction, and rejected natural rights while endorsing natural law, a matter on which he erred. Lon L. Fuller, *The Law in Quest of Itself* (Union, N.J.: Lawbook Exchange, 1999 [1940]).

²⁴ Randy E. Barnett, *The Structure of Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

²⁵ Michael S. Moore, *Objectivity in Ethics and Law* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004). Although it has long been fashionable in some quarters to regard natural rights as mere inventions, we would do well to heed the advice of (ironically enough) David Hume, who said that “Mankind is an inventive Species...and where an invention is obvious and absolutely necessary, it may as properly be said to be natural as any thing that proceeds immediately from original

morality can be complicated and exhausting, but are they any more so than discussions about political epistemology?

There is nothing less free—or, one might say, more costly—than *wertfrei* theories. Scheall's and Hayek's arguments about epistemological limits are helpful tools in policymaking, but only within the framework of a coherent normative theory about the proper role of the state. They simply cannot stand on their own.

principles without the intervention of thought or reflection.” David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. New York: Longmans, Green & Co. 1909 [1740], p. 258. Rights may be “invented” in the sense that they are propositions, and are not rocks or trees, and are therefore just as “invented” as the binomial theorem or the Austrian theory of the business cycle, but given their principled basis and absolute necessity, they are nonetheless “natural” in the relevant sense.

Godly versus Godlike Government¹

Forrest A. Nabors

University of Alaska Anchorage

With the publication of *F. A. Hayek and the Epistemology of Politics*, Dr. Scott Scheall, a philosopher of economics, has penetrated deep inside the territory of his cousin discipline, political science. His goal entails correcting "hundreds, if not thousands, of years [of] political thought" (3).² Although Scheall has brought with him formidable resources from economics, his foray into political science might profit by an advance briefing from a native-dweller, who thinks he knows the war-ravaged terrain and the stakes in the civil war between ancient and modern teaching on politics, in which Scheall has enlisted himself.

At bottom, Scheall's political science is partial to one side. His prescription would strengthen political science by strengthening its modern character. His work extends the modern project in politics, over and against the traces of our ancient inheritance that have remained with us, most conspicuously in the statesmanship and theory of the American founders. By framing his book in this way, we might consider the risks and costs of diminishing the influence of that older inheritance.

¹ Editor's note: this contribution was anonymously peer-reviewed.

² Scott Scheall, *F. A. Hayek and the Epistemology of Politics: The Curious Task of Economics* (New York: Routledge, 2020). All references to the book in this symposium are by page numbers in parentheses.

The contrast between ancient and modern political teaching begins at the contrast between two weighty opposites, ancient moderation and modern ambition. Certainly, we can espy differences and controversies among the ancients on the question of moderation, but from our perspective, surrounded as we are by the influences of the modern revolution, those differences narrow in significance. Endless examples from the old texts form a general, overlapping agreement among the ancient authorities on the necessity of moderation in a just and pious political society and ruler. In ancient Greek tragedy the gods or the cosmic order punish the hero's hubris. We moderns think nothing of casually marking the invention of fire as a great victory for human advancement, but the Greeks suspected this progress constituted an offense to the gods, costing Prometheus his liver.³ In Greek political philosophy immoderacy, or the unnatural, unchecked alimentation of all forms of desire, defines the tyrant. Mastered by impious desires, the tyrant forfeits his humanity and becomes a ravenous wolf, Socrates explains.⁴ Aristotle attributes tyranny to the unbridled hunger for self-aggrandizement and denominates the tyrant's rule the most contrary to offended nature.⁵ The account of Babel in ancient Hebrew scripture warns the faithful that God will scatter and confound you when, by your human cunning and artifice, you attempt to rival God.⁶ Satan's greatest crime is his quest to be like the Most High One.⁷ A medieval legend about King Canute of England preserves the ancient teaching.⁸ The tide defied his command to return to the sea and eventually lapped his royal robes as he sat throned by the seaside. By this patient demonstration of the limits of human power, Canute embarrassed his courtiers for their folly.

Fast forward two hundred years after the death of the last of the tribe of ancients, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and a strange new teaching

³ Aeschylus, "Prometheus Bound" in *Greek Tragedies*, ed. David Grene, Richard Lattimore, Mark Griffith and Glenn W. Most, 3rd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1:80, p. 110.

⁴ Plato, *Republic*, 565d-566b.

⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1287b35-40, 1302b5-33.

⁶ Genesis 11:4-9.

⁷ Isaiah 14:13-14.

⁸ Henry of Huntingdon, *The Chronicle of Henry of Huntingdon*, ed. Thomas Forester (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853), p. 199.

rises above the pages of recorded history. The new refutes or reverses the old. Christ had told Satan to get lost and had spurned the wicked offer to receive mastery over all the lands of the earth in exchange for worship.⁹ But Niccolo Machiavelli places himself in Satan's role, beginning *The Prince* with his approval of man's acquisitive desire, the ancient tyrant's supreme desire, to gain mastery over everything. He then proceeds to teach his admirers know-how, that is, the means of achieving the same mastery rejected by Christ, one conquered principality after the other.¹⁰ Machiavelli exhorts us to overcome our Goliaths with our own sling and our own knife, rather than to entrust our victories to God as David did.¹¹ He is at turns indifferent and passively hostile to the divine person who, or impersonal creator that made man - who cares? - but he is keenly interested in the existential cosmos that man daily confronts. For his purposes, the supreme antagonist is Chance. You must beat down Chance, Machiavelli teaches, because Chance is an unruly woman, and men should teach who is boss to such a one and in such a violent fashion.¹² That is how men master their own destiny. Man should pound the cosmos into powder, extract nature's secrets from the Petri dish, and use those secrets to force the cosmos to submit to his mastery.

The acceptance of teachings like this by intelligent men of course leads to the substitution of ambition for moderation in human affairs. Modern science and the administrative state are the programs made of, by and for ambition, and power is their product. Together, modern science and politics seek human mastery over natural forces as God commanded the wind and waves of the Red Sea through the outstretched arm of Moses.¹³ We have dams now, invented by science, planned by leviathan states, that have overcome the natural course of the waters and have converted barren lands into fertile plains, to our

⁹ Matthew 4:8-10.

¹⁰ "And truly it is a very natural and ordinary thing to desire to acquire, and always, when men do it who can, they will be praised, or not blamed...". Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, tr. Harvey C. Mansfield, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), Ch.I, p. 14.

¹¹ *Ibid*, Ch. XIII, p. 56. Contrast with the biblical account of David facing Goliath in I Samuel 17:45-47.

¹² Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. XXV, p. 101.

¹³ Exodus 14:27.

advantage. Who needs praying Moses? Who needs God? We are disenthralled, *modern* men!

Dr. Scheall sets his work squarely within the modern project and builds upon its philosophical and moral foundation. Although Scheall does not explicitly endorse and encourage modern ambition, the substance of his book nevertheless is an endorsement. Its premise is that with mortifying regularity the modern administrative state fails to achieve its intended aims. Policies do not yield the promised results. Instead, man's crackpot schemes to make heavenly Jerusalem on earth have amounted to "so much impracticable utopian wankery" (3). Political science, the oracle of the modern state, has not remedied the chronic failure in policymaking. Scheall steps into the problem and advances his solution, fashioned from Friedrich von Hayek's writings on epistemology.

Scheall's diagnosis is that policymakers tend to believe, or at least behave as if they believe, that their good intentions suffice to achieve good ends. On the contrary, he writes, "the moral quality of their convictions and intentions matters not a whit to whether a policy objective can be realized" (14). His criticism of policymakers is not merely that good intentions are necessary but insufficient. Rather, the good is unknowable prior to the acquisition of "*propositional knowledge-that* and *non-propositional knowledge-how*" because the acquisition of this knowledge is "logically prior" to knowledge of the good (15, 19, original emphasis). In other words, borrowing from Hobbes, it is an absurdity of language to speak of the good before we can accurately predict observable consequences, which is to say, before we can control Chance.¹⁴ That is the crucial knowledge that policymakers everywhere should seek before defining and pursuing the ends of policymaking, but they do not seek it (27-9). Notably, Scheall omits a robust review of the scholarly literature on theory and methods in the field of public policy. The omission might not disappoint the tastes of the reader but a review would usefully test the strength of his claim. The likely reason for passing on engagement with the field of public policy in a book on policymaking is that his goal is more expansive. Scheall aims at redefining the high mission of political

¹⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck, Raymond Guess, Quentin Skinner, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 34.

inquiry. Political science should strive for the acquisition of knowledge as he understands it.

Assuming that the claimed shortcoming in policymaking is true, policymakers have put the "normative cart before the epistemic horse," Scheall repeats (17, 91, 178). Flush with modern ambition, policymakers have fallen prey to hubris. The success of the modern project bred a religious faith in modernity. Scheall agrees with Hayek's identification of this phenomena, which he denominated "scientism" (61). Faith in measurements, statistics, and metrics induced intellectual laziness and excessive self-confidence. In the area of governance, modern man is resting on his now-withered laurels.

Is Scheall leading us back to the ancient virtue of moderation? No. Following Hayek, he teaches a kind of moderation, but it is of the redefined, modern variety, not the ancient variety. The problem is not policymakers' ambition, but that they use the authority of the state before having developed requisite know-how. Whereas King Canute evidently believed that commands beyond the natural limits of man were fruitless and impious, the modern state reflexively attempts to overleap those limits before the state is adequately prepared. Sometimes to speed up, you have to slow down. Scheall counsels a pause for better preparation. Unquestionably, the purpose of this pause is to speed up the modern project.

Hayek is approvingly cast as a peculiarly modern variant of Socrates, showing overconfident modern policymakers that they do not even know what they do not know. Scheall calls this second-order ignorance, which we must relieve first, to make progress towards first-order wisdom (27). And we must do our best to become first-order wise because the job of the policymaker is to operate on bodies of human societies, which requires that the surgeon knows the patient. Policymaking should proceed only after we have overcome our "epistemic burden" (19).

But Scheall's portrait of Hayek differs from Plato's portrait of Socrates before the Athenian jury because the interlocutors are new. Meletus and Anytus have changed from intellectually lazy, overconfident worshippers of the traditional gods to intellectually lazy,

overconfident worshippers of the scientific tradition.¹⁵ Our best and brightest citizens need a new gadfly, Hayek, with an assist from Scheall, who admonishes them in the new, modern terms of empiricism. In those terms, why is knowledge of human things difficult? Hayek taught that human societies are complex phenomena. They are specimen unlike all other bodies found in the cosmos in that the great magnitude of variables in their systems stretch the capacity to explain, predict, and control (38-9).

To succeed in knowing man and crafting successful policy, one must learn how to use modernity's tried-and-true magic wand, empiricism. The methods that derive from the empiricist's view of the cosmos unlock the effectual truth of things, or knowledge of things that yields results. Guided by Hayek's empiricist epistemology, Scheall steers modern man back to the laboratory. Mechanisms like market prices embed innumerable variables within man's complex systems and must be sought. Those mechanisms can efficiently communicate empirical knowledge of a vast array of particulars to policymakers (137). Theories must be devised that can identify these mechanisms and use them to predict the success of policymaking plans (155). Proposed policies should only proceed when these theories expose the likelihood of success to empirical tests (158-60). Applying improved empirical discipline to their work, policymakers can produce effective policy, which in good empiricist terms, is good policy. Scheall hopes that he has developed a meta-theory of new political order, that might precipitate more work, more theories that will fill in the blanks he has defined.

"Policymakers are not gods," Scheall writes at the beginning of his work (29). But at the end we learn that policymakers can become gods. He argues for a refashioned constitution that delimits the domains where policymaking may be permitted, based upon "what policymakers can and cannot deliberately achieve, a determination that can be made only through empirical political epistemology" (173). Within those constitutionally-delimited domains, policymakers may acquire the attributes of the divine, or as Scheall puts the case, policymakers may become "functionally omniscient and omnipotent with respect to policy-related decisions" (175). The architects of the refashioned constitution

¹⁵ See Plato, *Apology*.

will gather foreknowledge of mankind's functional omniscience and omnipotence, "[a]s political-epistemological inquiry progresses" (173). Then the beneficent gods may skillfully operate the gears and wheels of the divinized state on behalf of a grateful humanity.

On the one hand, effectiveness in the organization and activity of government is a good. If Scheall's contribution has improved the theory and methods of public policy, we will be glad. Is anybody in favor of implementing more "impracticable utopian wankery"? Our own American founders paid tribute to modern machinery in government, which promotes effectiveness, and then fitted that new machinery to our new constitutional order. In the Ninth Federalist Essay Alexander Hamilton praises modern man's invention of "stupendous fabrics" in government and promises that "America will be the broad and solid foundation of other edifices, not less magnificent."¹⁶

On the other hand, to counteract the unhealthy modern prejudice that the primary business of serious scholars ought to be investigating effectual truths and effectiveness, we ought to remind ourselves, perhaps with daily prayers, that effectiveness is a qualified good. Effective extermination of the innocent is bad; effective elimination of poverty is good. We do not need empirical knowledge of observable consequences to affirm the good and denounce evil. Our object ought to be to snatch the devil's wisdom about power and then to run away fast. Tarrying too long in the apartments of the devil ensnares us in Faustian bargains, makes us forget our angelic purposes and drives us mad. Just ask Oppenheimer's ghost.

The good is not a given. In our times we have seen effective policies accomplishing diabolical ends. Policymaking is and must be subordinate to the first-order concern of political science, establishing and preserving just political regimes that policymaking serve. The fundamental laws of political regimes address highest ends and are different in kind from the laws that direct policy to particular, ancillary ends.

¹⁶ Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter and Charles R. Kesler (New York: Signet Classic, 2003), pp. 66-7.

Scheall is muted about higher ends, which is notable in a book that attempts an overhaul of political science. The first lines of Aristotle's *Politics* discuss the relation among the good, human action and human partnerships, a discussion that is a cornerstone to his theory.¹⁷ Such beginnings in political science have become more rare. The reflexive, modern attempt to separate values and facts is not an amoral choice. The attempt reflects a normative view that itself is associated with the modern revolution. In Scheall's conception of the universe, the good, noble and just cannot exist generally, but are, at best, in flux with our universe's swirl of ever-changing particulars. His repeated explanation and insistence that knowledge is logically prior to normative considerations assumes an orthodox empiricist's view. The knowledge he seeks at the end of the rainbow is knowledge of predictable results, not knowledge about how to maintain the best possible political regime. Political scientists are taken to Scheall's woodshed because, in his view, we have not made the attainment of knowledge our first priority. A branch of our profession, political philosophy, has made the Socratic quest for knowledge the object of our lives, but that is not the kind of knowledge that interests Scheall. He wants theory to give us advance knowledge that a given policy will be effective. Nothing in his meta-theory prohibits retrofitting his scholarly contribution for a more effective holocaust, because the moral foundation of his theory forecloses the existence of universal, moral truths. We have no reason to doubt that Dr. Scheall expects good uses of his teaching, and would loathe that possible outcome. But so did Gorgias expect good uses of his teaching on rhetoric, until Socrates questions his student Callicles in the presence of his teacher. Excellence in rhetoric, thanks to Gorgias, gave Callicles plausible means of satisfying his ambition, tyrannical mastery of others. Gorgias silently discovers that he has armed a monster.¹⁸

It is possible that Scheall's promotion of effectiveness over justice is not a principled choice, but instead derives from misunderstanding political science. His central illustration of our perennial error demonstrates misunderstanding. David Hume was wrong, Scheall argues, when he wrote that "in contriving any system of

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1252a1-6

¹⁸ See Plato, *Gorgias*.

government, and fixing the several checks and controuls of the constitution, every man ought to be supposed a knave, and to have no other end, in all his actions, than private interest" (15). Why was Hume wrong? Scheall answers, because Hume erroneously rated incentives higher than knowledge in policymaking. But Hume is not writing about policymaking. He is writing about constitution-making, building a good political regime that will last. Men can be knaves or saints, but you better assume when constituting your regime that the knaves will find their way to the seats of power. That is Hume's point. The same sobriety about knaves and saints informed our own constitution-making in America, as the Fifty-First Federalist Essay bears witness. We need auxiliary controls in government because men are not angels.¹⁹

Later Scheall discusses what he calls "liberal transitions." In these passages he criticizes an unsupported claim that a respectable political scientist would not advance, that regime change to liberalism is simple and easy (79). He counters that the cultural preparedness determines whether a liberal political regime may take root and prosper, which is commonplace to anyone who has meditated over the writings of Aristotle or Montesquieu. He makes a series of rather curious statements about liberalizing regimes, including: "What they would appear to lack is a theory of how the required cultural pre-conditions can be realized that conduce to the eventual deliberate realization of liberalism via the standard institutional means, beginning from cultural circumstances that are not so conducive" (80). Suffice it to say that the entire canon of political philosophy deals with forms of political regimes as the preeminent theme; how they are strengthened, weakened, established, and revolutionized; the tension between the way of life of the people and institutions, etc. Then he writes, "Defenders of liberalism need to do more than merely extol the virtues of life inside a liberal order; they also need to show that such an order might be realized in actual fact."²⁰ The American founders realized such a regime in fact. They knew the textbook of political disquisitions from the ancients to their own times and adapted all of it for their revolution. They contributed their own theoretical innovations, confirmed by proofs in their statesmanship.

¹⁹ Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, p. 319.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 81.

In addition, the Americans were aware of, and dealt with Scheall's problem, the problem of policymaker ignorance. James Madison recognized that the accession of saintly princes to power does not resolve the problem. He explains, "the eyes of a good prince cannot see all that he ought to know," and increasing "the extent of the domain" increases the evil.²¹ Had they staked the future of their country on the bet that a good prince, aided by all the mechanical devices modernity can create, can overcome natural human limitations and rule like an all-seeing god, they would have been guilty of hubris. "Nature's God" might have swiftly punished them. But, Madison continues, eschewing princely government, "a confederated Republic... avoids the ignorance of a good prince."

Madison and the Americans chose the path of moderation. They build a political system upon universal truths applicable to all men at all times. Not coincidentally, that system included their solution to policymaker ignorance, popular self-government protected by federalism.

The Constitution grants to the federal government only the sum of enumerated powers plus those powers that may give effect to those enumerated powers. The character of those powers is that of powers that a national government alone may exercise. The federal government is constitutionally restricted from enacting policy except within this defined range. This arrangement forecloses badly-informed pursuits of harebrained utopias from the national seat, and leaves the bulk of government activity, policymaking, to subsidiary governments. The founders trusted in the people to decide good policy within this constitutional order and were right to do so.

Let us restate Madison's republican theory in the terms Scheall uses: The advantage to policymaking in this arrangement is that the limited faculties of the sovereign prince are multiplied and distributed into the unlimited faculties of sovereign citizens. Each citizen is a node in a vast network, sweeping up, mediating and communicating knowledge about the performance of their complex systems. Institutions within the constitutional order regularly register and aggregate

²¹ James Madison, *The Writings*, ed. Gaillard Hunt. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1906), vol. VI, pp. 80-1.

knowledge and serve as efficient epistemic mechanisms. Federalism preserves the close distance between citizens and policymaking activity, which uses that knowledge. The close distance maintains the interest of the citizen in gathering, mediating and communicating knowledge, because the objects of policy and influence over the direction of the policymaker are within his purview. The people and policymakers share this dynamic body of knowledge. Under these circumstances the policymaker is of the people and less prone to error.

A necessary condition of the success of the system is that federalism is respected. If the powers of government shift to a distant center, policymaking will likewise shift to that center. That shift enervates the interest of citizens in informing themselves and formally expressing themselves in institutions established for that purpose, because they no longer feel that they govern themselves. Others enact policy that they must obey, which is imperial government, not self-government. Consequently, republican institutions forfeit their efficacy as epistemic mechanisms. The knowledge gap between the people and policymakers widens. As a result, the people are left to merely supply interests and wants in response to stimuli; policymakers face heavier epistemic burdens to satisfy them.

Scheall's passages on the relationship between the people and policymakers manifests more of the second circumstances than the first (24-7). Constituents and policymakers are disconnected. Although Scheall's passages are intended to describe their timeless relationship, current historical conditions seem to influence Scheall's description of this disconnection. It was not always so. Our system of government has changed. Because real respect for federalism has waned, self-government has likewise waned, steadily replaced by imperial government. As a result, citizenship as it once existed is rarer. The founders' solution to the problem of policymaking ignorance is becoming unavailable to us. Within our system of government as it exists now, an informed, active citizenry as a key device in bridging the knowledge gap between citizen and policymaker is becoming obsolete.

The disconnection between constituents and policymakers inflates the epistemic burden of the policymaker. The imperial center that absorbs the burden of policymaking has inherited the susceptibility of monarchy to the blindness of the good prince as Madison describes.

Scheall's work responds to this imperial blindness and consequent bungling. We might indeed need to search for new mechanisms to overcome policymakers' ignorance, and we might also need to find new limits to trammel the frequent outbreaks of visionary quackery within the imperial center of American government, since we long ago stopped observing the prescribed limits in the Constitution. From a republican point of view, the original arrangement was far preferable.

Author's Reply: Governed by Ignorance

Scott Scheall

Arizona State University

I am delighted for the opportunity to respond to the engaging and constructive comments of Professors Skoble and Nabors, and Mr. Sandefur, concerning my book, *F. A. Hayek and the Epistemology of Politics: The Curious Task of Economics*.¹ As someone who works on relatively obscure and extremely nerdy subjects, it is always an honor – and often a surprise – when anyone takes the time to read and earnestly reflect upon my work. I thank the symposium participants for their generous contributions and my friend, Dr. Shawn E. Klein, editor of *Reason Papers*, for organizing the symposium. Before replying to my critics, it will be helpful for readers who have not yet read the book to recapitulate the main arguments.

1. Recapitulation

F. A. Hayek and the Epistemology of Politics is primarily intended as a contribution to the philosophy and methodology of the Austrian School of economics (pp. 1-2). However, as the symposium participants are all quick to note, several of the book's central

¹ Scott Scheall, *F. A. Hayek and the Epistemology of Politics: The Curious Task of Economics* (Abingdon, UK and New York: Routledge, 2020). All references to the book in this symposium are by page numbers in parentheses.

arguments, especially those advanced in the first chapter, are of potential significance far beyond Austrian economics. The arguments of the first chapter present an important *methodological* challenge to multiple fields of political inquiry, to traditional political philosophy and theory, and to modern political science, as well as a significant *practical* problem for anyone concerned with the effectiveness of political action. Professional political thinkers and laypersons alike conceive the basic political problem to concern the motivations, reasons, incentives, etc., of policymakers. On this way of thinking, the fundamental problem to be solved, analytically, by the disciplines of political inquiry, and, practically, in political life, is *how to ensure that policymakers are adequately motivated to pursue policy goals either that are in constituents' interests or that constituents' want pursued*. I do not deny the significance of this problem or the value of the proposed solutions, whether analytical or practical-constitutional, that have been offered in the long course of the history of politics and political thought. The book does not suggest that we should scrap thousands of years of political inquiry and start all over again.

However, it does argue that political inquiry has started in the wrong place, that there is a better starting point, which promises to enrich political analysis. There is a more fundamental political problem than that of policymakers' incentives that has too long been ignored. If, as I argue in the first chapter, epistemic considerations play the fundamental role in human decision-making – and, thus, in political decision-making – in particular, if the nature and extent of our *ignorance*, our *epistemic burden*, with respect to a course of action serves to determine whether and to what extent we are motivated to pursue it, then the problem of policymaker incentives is ancillary to the *problem of policymaker ignorance*. The book argues, moreover, that the degree to which policymaker ignorance is a problem determines the extent of the ancillary incentive problem. That is, in a world where policymakers know everything they need to know to realize goals associated with their constituents' policy interests or policy demands, there is less scope for selfish, corrupt, or otherwise non-constituent-minded, policy pursuits. On the other hand, where policymakers are ignorant, in whole or in part, of the knowledge required to realize their constituents' interests or demands, it is comparatively easy – the policymaker faces a relatively greater incentive – to *not* be constituent-

minded. To see this, just consider an extreme case in which policymakers are entirely ignorant of the knowledge required to satisfy their constituents, where policymakers know nothing about constituents' policy interests and demands, and nothing about how to realize policy goals associated with these demands. Obviously, given this ignorance, these constituent-minded goals will be realized only if luck, fortune, or other unintended, *spontaneous*, forces intervene to compensate for the goal-defeating effects of policymaker ignorance. More to the point, if policymakers *recognize* their ignorance, if they see that trying to satisfy their constituents is likely to end in failure, unless forces beyond their ken and control intervene, then they are unlikely to even attempt to satisfy their constituents; policymakers ignorant of how to realize goals that their constituents want (or need) are relatively more likely to pursue other, non-constituent-minded goals. In particular, if policymakers recognize that earnest pursuit of policy objectives in their constituents' interests is likely to end in failure and that they can accrue similar benefits by merely *pretending*, by simply paying lip service, to the pursuit of goals in their constituents' interests, they are relatively more likely to engage in political theater than to earnestly pursue constituent-minded goals. In short, the nature and extent of their ignorance with respect to constituent-mindedness serves to determine the nature and extent of – what kind and how much – constituent-mindedness we get from policymakers. Ignorance constrains and binds the human reasoning process within more or less narrow borders. Ignorance always comes *first* and contributes to determining the incentives, motivations, etc., that ultimately determine a decision.

It is important to recognize that this thesis of the *logical priority of the epistemic* in human (and, therefore, in political) decision-making, though novel and seemingly radical, is becoming better established in the philosophical and psychological literatures. Arguments for the thesis and analysis of its implications have appeared in *Cosmos + Taxis: Studies in Emergent Order and Organization, Medicine, Health Care, and Philosophy*, *American Journal of Bioethics*, and *Episteme*.² I

² See, respectively, Scott Scheall, "Ignorance and the Incentive Structure confronting Policymakers" *Cosmos + Taxis: Studies in Emergent Order and Organization*, 7, no. 1-2 (2019), pp. 39-51; Parker Crutchfield and Scott Scheall, "Epistemic Burdens and the Incentives of Surrogate Decision-makers" *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, 22 (2019), pp. 613-621; Parker

mention this not to appeal to my own authority or to the authority of these journals, but to suggest that the logical priority of the epistemic cannot simply be wished away because one does not like its implications.³ Arguments for the thesis must be criticized on their own grounds. I offer two such arguments in the first chapter of the book for the logical priority of the epistemic.⁴

The first argument relies on introspection. Reflection on our own decision processes reveals that the options that we consciously consider in any given decision context seem to have been (pre-consciously) sorted for the nature and extent of our ignorance. Somehow, by some mechanism, courses of action with respect to which we are ignorant, do not appear to us in consciousness as options worth pursuing.

The toy example I like to use here asks the reader to imagine a scenario in which they must travel some considerable distance across country and the various means they might employ to reach their destination. Many potential courses of action to realize this goal – e.g., air, rail, automobile, or pedestrian travel – might consciously appear to the reader as options to evaluate in light of relevant normative considerations, such as the comparative ethical properties, prudence, and

Crutchfield and Scott Scheall, “Epistemic Burdens, Moral Intimacy, and Surrogate Decision Making” *American Journal of Bioethics*, 20, no 2, (2020), pp. 59-61; Scott Scheall and Parker Crutchfield. “The Priority of the Epistemic.” *Episteme*, Issue TBD, Published online 18 February 2020: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/episteme/article/priority-of-the-epistemic/C84747A8C333A1019FB573D3E6EEDCC6>.

³ Apropos of the objections of my critics, I explicitly define policymaking in the book to encompass the crafting of a political constitution (p. 15). Thus, as I conceive it, policymaking includes the choice of the “fundamental laws of political regimes [that] address highest ends” (Nabors, “Godly versus Godlike Government,” *Reason Papers*, 42, no. 2 (2020), p. 36). That the choice of “higher ends” is encompassed in the analysis is also implied by the argument for the full generality of the logical priority of the epistemic in human decision-making. As much as my critics might wish them to be, such choices are not exempt from the logical priority of the epistemic.

⁴ Also see Scott Scheall and Parker Crutchfield. “The Priority of the Epistemic.” *Episteme*, Issue TBD, Published online 18 February 2020: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/episteme/article/priority-of-the-epistemic/C84747A8C333A1019FB573D3E6EEDCC6>.

pecuniary cost of the various options. But, other ways that one might try to travel to a destination will not reach this level of conscious consideration. For example, I predict that flying like a bird without mechanical assistance will not consciously appear to the reader as an option, because the reader knows (if only un- or sub-consciously) that they are ignorant how to fly like a bird without mechanical assistance. Ignorance has already done its work, on an un- or sub-conscious level, to prevent this course of action from consciously appearing to the reader as an option. Of course, it is very good for the reader and, ultimately, for the reader's species, that the constraining and binding function of ignorance on human decision-making apparently serves to prevent the conscious consideration of such sure-to-be-disastrous courses of action. If ignorance did not constrain our options, there would be more people trying to fly like birds and falling flat, literally.

To counter this argument, one must provide an argument that personal decision-making does not in fact proceed in this fashion, i.e., from un- or sub-conscious evaluation of knowledge, and ignorance, to conscious consideration of remaining options in light of relevant (moral/ethical, prudential, pecuniary) normative criteria. One needs to show, in other words, that individuals regularly consciously evaluate courses of action about which they know themselves to be ignorant, that it is not un- or sub-conscious recognition of their relevant ignorance that keeps people from the consequences of trying to fly like birds, but conscious evaluation of this course of action.

The second argument for the logical priority of the epistemic considers the relationship between our obligations and our ability to bring about states of affairs associated with these obligations. Most people accept that some relationship obtains between the things we *ought* to do and the things we *can* do. As ever, there is disagreement among philosophers about the exact nature and logical strength of this relationship. My second argument for the logical priority of the epistemic does not hinge on whether *implication* rather some other logical relation properly binds ought and can. My argument is that, in order for it to be practically useful, the word "can" in the correct principle, whatever it is, must mean *deliberately can*. Every other candidate meaning for "can" makes the resulting principle practically useless, i.e., makes it such that the principle could never be put to

practical use to determine one's potential obligations and to determine, conversely, those actions that one could never be obligated to perform. On the assumption that the correct principle is practically useful – and why would we worry about such principles if the correct principle were not practically useful? – every other meaning of “can” makes the principle inoperable. Thus, by reductio, whatever the correct principle, the word “can” must mean *deliberately can*. But, to say that one “deliberately can” do something is just to say that the person can perform the action on the basis of their own knowledge and learning capacity, that the action is entirely within their ken and under their control, that the person *knows enough to* perform the action (successfully) without need for the intervention of luck, fortune, or any other spontaneous forces. In short, if *ought implies* (or whatever) *can*, then *ought implies* (or whatever) *knows enough to*. The epistemic, the “can” or, more exactly, the “knows enough to,” is logically prior to the (non-epistemic) normative, the “ought.”

To counter this argument, it is necessary to show that there is another candidate meaning of “can” that renders such principles practically useful. However, as I argue in the first chapter of the book, the most obvious competing interpretations of “can” make such principles useless.

The upshot of these two arguments is that, when human beings make decisions for themselves, we always reason from what is known to what potentially ought to be done and never from (non-epistemic) normative considerations alone. Again, this seems an important part of any explanation of why we survive in the world to the extent that we do: we rarely, if ever, saddle ourselves with impossible obligations, with things we purportedly ought to do, but that are bound to fail without spontaneous assistance, because we have not first considered our epistemic burdens. Reflecting on the relative epistemic burdens of competing courses of action, if only unconsciously, is a means of avoiding personal disaster.⁵ The pre-conscious understanding that

⁵ I hesitate to mention this here, as it might ultimately prove premature, but several colleagues and I are in the process of experimentally testing the thesis of the priority of the epistemic to see if we can induce different kinds of moral judgments by manipulating what subjects know about relevant circumstances. Suffice it to say that our results so far do not falsify the thesis.

airplane travel is to be consciously considered, but that bird-like travel is not, likely saves lives.

The only exception to this rule that reasoning proceeds from what is known to what potentially ought to be done occurs in cases of *surrogate* decision-making, when some persons decide on behalf and ostensibly in the interests, of some other persons. Surrogate decision-makers are purportedly obligated either to promote the interests of the surrogated or, what is sometimes the same thing, to decide as the surrogated person would decide, if they could decide for themselves. But, notice that this purported obligation assumes a proposition that may well be false, namely, that the surrogate *knows* the interests of the surrogated and *knows how* to promote them, or, alternatively, that the surrogate *knows* how the surrogated would decide, if they could decide for themselves. In effect, the purported obligation of surrogate decision-makers assumes that surrogates possess or can learn the same knowledge as the persons on whose behalf they decide, an assumption rarely, if ever, satisfied. Put another way, surrogate decision-makers cannot always, deliberately or otherwise, satisfy their purported obligations. If the foregoing argument about the meaning of “can” in principles like *ought implies* (or whatever) *can* is sound, then surrogates who are ignorant in the relevant ways are not obligated to promote the interests of the surrogated or to decide as the surrogated person would decide. We attribute obligations to surrogate decision-makers that they cannot always satisfy. When satisfaction is beyond the surrogate’s ken, the purported obligation evaporates.

More to the point, unlike in cases of personal decision-making, in surrogate cases, there is no mechanism for avoiding disaster. Surrogate decision-makers are sometimes “obligated” to do things they cannot do. If they try to realize their so-called “obligations” despite their ignorance, they are likely to fail and the interests of those surrogated are unlikely to be respected, unless, of course, spontaneous forces intervene to compensate for the consequences of the surrogate’s ignorance.

Policymakers are surrogate decision-makers. They decide on behalf and ostensibly in the interests of their constituents. There is no mechanism that ensures they possess the knowledge required to do so. There is no mechanism that helps avoid ignorance-induced disaster in political decision-making. Policymakers are purportedly obligated to do

things that, sometimes, they cannot do. If they try to realize this non-obligation, they are likely to fail and the interests of their constituents will be respected only if spontaneous forces intervene to compensate the effects of their ignorance.

My suggestion is that, if we want to avoid political disaster (and I assume we do), we should reason in politics as we do in our personal lives, from what is known to what (potentially) ought to be done, rather than, as we currently reason in all cases of surrogate, including political, decision-making, from “ought” considerations alone. The former is a method for avoiding disaster, the latter an invitation to it. In order to avoid political disaster, we should first consider what policymakers can and cannot know, and only then consider what they ought to do. We should stop assigning obligations to policymakers without considering the adequacy – or otherwise – of their epistemic capacities.

At the end of the first chapter, I offer a “taxonomy” of ignorant policymakers and of the consequences of different kinds of policymaker ignorance (pp. 27-29). There are four species of policymaker. Those who know that they are ignorant with respect to some policy objective, as above, face an incentive to pursue *other objectives*, other things equal. Policymakers who are ignorant of their knowledge regarding some goal, because they also believe, albeit mistakenly, that pursuing the goal will end in failure, likewise confront an incentive, *ceteris paribus*, to pursue other goals. Policymakers who are ignorant of their ignorance with respect to some policy goal are potentially quite dangerous: they face an incentive to pursue goals that they are too ignorant to achieve, goals that are likely to fail because of their ignorance, the likely failure of which they fail to appreciate because they are ignorant of their ignorance. Hayek diagnosed such ignorant-of-their-ignorance policymakers as suffering from a “pretence of knowledge.”⁶ It is only those policymakers who know that their knowledge is sufficient with respect to some policy goal – the “wise captains of the ship of state” – whose incentives cannot be distorted by ignorance (because, *ex hypothesi*, they are not ignorant).⁷

⁶ F. A. Hayek, “The Pretence of Knowledge” in B. J. Caldwell (ed.), *The Collected Works of F. A. Hayek, Volume XV, The Market and Other Orders* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1975] 2014, pp. 362-372.

⁷ Plato’s wise captain or “true pilot of the ship of state” is discussed in Book VI

The arguments of the subsequent five chapters of the book are, as compared to those of the first chapter, relatively easily recapitulated:

In the second chapter, I argue that the logical priority of the epistemic is implicit in the Austrians' arguments against socialist central planning and Keynesian-style demand management. If one extends the Austrians' reasoning to other, non-economic, policymaking contexts, one eventually arrives at the problem of policymaker ignorance. Indeed, if one extends this same reasoning to contexts other than the political, one eventually arrives at a fully general *problem of ignorance* that is relevant in all decision contexts, within and outside politics.

The generality of ignorance and its effects on decision-making, and on the success or failure of decisions taken, represents both an opening and a closing for Austrian economists. It is an opening, I argue in Chapter Three, in the sense that it is an opportunity to extend their political-epistemological approach to policy criticism to contexts other than the socialistic and Keynesian. It is a closing, however, in the sense that Austrians have not shown that the preference, seemingly universally shared among Austrian economists, for liberal democracy and for liberalization from the status quo is immune to the same kind of epistemic criticisms they level at socialists and Keynesians. Indeed, I argue that creating and sustaining liberal societies involves considerable epistemic burdens that Austrians have not shown to be surmountable by human – and, therefore, epistemically limited – policymakers.

In Chapter Four, I consider the specifically epistemological aspects of political epistemology. I argue that, in order to facilitate discussion and intersubjective agreement concerning policymaker knowledge, and ignorance, political epistemology must proceed as an empirical discipline. The knowledge possessed or lacked by policymakers must be conceived as open to empirical investigation, at least to a degree. Such agreement would be impossible *in principle* were political epistemology founded on rationalistic *a priori* axioms. I argue that Hayek's own theory of knowledge – which defines knowledge as the explicit and tacit assumptions of *plans of action* that can be

of *The Republic*, not Book IV, as erroneously indicated in my text (p. 29). Plato, *The Republic*. Translated by G. M. A. Grube (Second Edition). Revised by C. D. C. Reeve. (Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 1992).

implemented successfully, without need for the intervention of spontaneous forces – fits the required bill.

In the fifth and sixth chapters, I draw various implications from the Hayekian canon relevant to the analysis and possible mitigation of the consequences of policymaker ignorance. In Chapter Five, I argue that the Hayekian theory of social order bears important implications for an “epistemic-mechanistic” method of analyzing and possibly mitigating the consequences of policymaker ignorance. We need mechanisms that convey to both policymakers and constituents the knowledge that members of each class require to successfully adapt their plans to relevant circumstances. I note that any so-called democratic government in which policymakers are ignorant either of constituents’ wants and needs, or of how to realize ends associated with these wants and needs, does not in fact respect the principle of *popular sovereignty* and is, therefore, at best, democratic in name and superficial appearance only. In Chapter Six, I describe another approach to the problem of policymaker ignorance that would aim to constitutionally debar policymakers from pursuing goals they were too ignorant to contribute to realizing. The constitutional approach would investigate policymakers’ knowledge and ignorance, try to determine what kinds of goals policymakers could help realize on the basis of their epistemic capacities, and then constitutionally prohibit political action with regard to goals that, because of their ignorance, policymakers could not help realize.

These two methods are not mutually exclusive and might be combined. That is, we might try to develop more effective mechanisms for communicating relevant knowledge between policymakers and constituents, while also seeking to restrict political action to domains with regard to which policymaker knowledge is adequate for a positive effect.

However, it must be emphasized how modest my expectations are for positive political-epistemological analysis. Empiricism makes political epistemology possible, but, as every empiricist knows, it is not a method of discovering *certainty*. I do not pretend to offer methods of analysis in the last two chapters of the book akin to a philosopher’s stone that will turn our base politics into golden utopia. The arguments of the second part of the book are mere suggestions for the subsequent

development of political epistemology. Indeed, I am explicit throughout the book that its main purpose is to analyze the many deleterious consequences of policymaker ignorance and to encourage further analysis, and new research, into its causes and effects. If it means that the problem of policymaker ignorance is finally recognized as the fundamental political problem, if it means that the problem of policymaker incentives is accordingly demoted to the ancillary status in political inquiry which is, logically, its due, the book will have succeeded in its primary mission.

2. Reply to Skoble

Of the three reviewers, Professor Skoble read the book most charitably and accurately. His extensions and elaborations of various arguments in the book improve it considerably. I will have occasion to refer to Skoble's essay many times as I continue to develop the research project.

There are only a few clarifying comments that I will make in response to Professor Skoble. First, although the book is perhaps most directly applicable to liberal democracy, the central arguments are relevant wherever policymakers act as surrogates, wherever they are expected to act on behalf of some other people, their constituents. This describes practically all governments, ancient and modern.⁸ Even autocrats are *expected* to act in the interests of constituents, whether they ever do or not. Second, Professor Skoble is surely correct to note that what a constituent wants from policymakers may not track with what is in the constituent's (true) best interests, i.e., that what a person believes to be in their interest may not actually be in their interest, and, therefore, that policymakers are unlikely to know what is in their constituents' interests, since the latter do not know themselves. In the book, I wanted to avoid the question whether it is more important for policymakers to pursue their constituents' interests or their constituents' demands, inasmuch as these come apart, as nothing of substance for my argument required taking a stance on this vexed problem. There is no reason to

⁸ Another reviewer, Professor Nabors, is wrong to claim that the book is about the modern administrative state (Nabors, p. 33).

think that policymakers are generally more knowledgeable about constituents' policy demands than they are about constituents' interests (or *vice versa*), so nothing for political epistemology hinges on this difference. Whether you think policymakers should pursue their constituents' demands or their constituents' (true) interests, policymaker ignorance is likely to undermine the purported obligation.

3. Reply to Sandefur

According to Mr. Sandefur, the book encompasses a normative argument for spontaneous order, which he takes to be problematic on the grounds that there is no "qualitative" difference between spontaneous and constructed orders, a proposition he believes to have established in the secondary literature on Hayek.⁹ Unfortunately, this proposition has never, to my knowledge, been denied by any serious Hayekian scholar. Now, surely, Hayek's ideas have been used and abused in many different ways. Indeed, in his later – and, it must be said, declining – years, Hayek himself was not as careful about the consistent use of his ideas as he was in his prime (see Footnote 2 in Sandefur's essay), a fact that I criticize extensively, if only implicitly, in the third chapter of the book. However, the consensus in modern Hayek studies is and, from what I can tell, has long been, that the difference between spontaneity and construction is a continuum, not a dichotomy, i.e., that every spontaneous order will encompass some deliberate actions and every constructed order some spontaneity.¹⁰ No one thinks that the deliberately planned actions of

⁹ Timothy Sandefur, "Think Inside the Box" *Reason Papers*, 42, no. 2 (2020) p. 13; see also Timothy Sandefur, "Some Problems with Spontaneous Order" *The Independent Review* 14, no. 1 (2009), pp. 5-25.

¹⁰ Hayek denies the "dichotomy" reading in favor of the "continuity" interpretation of spontaneous order in "Kinds of Rationalism." Hayek's fellow Nobel Prize winner (and committed Hayekian) Vernon Smith similarly denies the dichotomy reading. Likewise, David Schmidtz (who I quote in support of the continuity interpretation on page 156, footnote 4, of the book), Roger Koppl and me are all committed to the continuity reading of spontaneous order. Indeed, I know no Hayekian who accepts the dichotomy interpretation. See, F. A. Hayek, "Kinds of Rationalism" in *The Collected Works of F. A. Hayek, Volume XV, The Market and Other Orders*, ed. B.J. Caldwell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1964] 2014), pp. 39-53. Vernon L. Smith, *Rationality in Economics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 2. David Schmidtz, "Friedrich Hayek" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of*

individual market participants are immaterial to the emergence of the invisible hand of market society. The market order is “spontaneous” in the sense that its emergence is not intended by anyone, not planned and imposed from the top down, though its emergence may – of course – involve a fair amount of intentional planning from the bottom up, as it were, among individual market participants. Conversely, some plan may be deliberately realized only if the planner has properly accounted for how others will spontaneously adapt to relevant circumstances. If, in addition to whatever other knowledge is required, the planner knows how people will spontaneously react and accounts for these reactions in their plan, then they can be said to have deliberately realized the outcome, regardless of how much spontaneity may have been required from other persons. Nothing about my argument requires spontaneous orders to be spontaneous *all the way down*, as it were, or, for that matter, requires that spontaneity play no role in the results of deliberate planning. If policymakers possess all of the knowledge required to bring about some outcome, including how others will spontaneously respond to circumstances – I am agnostic how often, if ever, policymakers satisfy this condition – then they will be able to deliberately realize the outcome. If not, then not, and the goal will be realized only if spontaneous forces not encompassed in their political plans intervene to compensate the consequences of policymakers’ ignorance.

Sandefur has no objection to the descriptive or explanatory use of the concept of spontaneity, but this is the only way that the concept is used in the book. *Contra* Sandefur, I have no “bias” in favor of spontaneous order.¹¹ I am not trying to justify a pro-spontaneity bias. The book is simply about pointing out and drawing out the implications of the problem of policymaker ignorance, and suggesting a few ways

Philosophy, ed. E.N. Zalta, 2012 URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2012/entries/friedrich-hayek/>. Caryn Devins, Roger Koppl, Stuart Kauffman, and Teppo Felin, “Against Design” *Arizona State Law Journal*, 47 (3), 2015, pp. 609-681. Scott Scheall, “Lesser Degrees of Explanation: Some Implications of F. A. Hayek’s Methodology of Sciences of Complex Phenomena.” *Erasmus Journal for Philosophy and Economics*, 8 (1), 2015, pp. 42-60.

¹¹ Sandefur, p. 14.

that the problem might be analyzed and perhaps to some degree mitigated.

There is no normative defense of spontaneity to be found anywhere in the book. There are no “policy recommendations” in the book, which is entirely, and explicitly, about the methodology and history of political inquiry.¹² Indeed, Chapter Three should be read as an attack on the exceedingly simplistic notion that, politically speaking, we “ought” to give free rein to spontaneity. I argue that, inasmuch as they are aimed at bringing about particular outcomes, both the policies of *doing nothing* and of *doing nothing but removing obstacles to the operation of spontaneous forces* bear epistemic burdens that may not be surmountable by epistemically-limited human policymakers. I am not, as Sandefur seems to think, advocating for either (or any) policy. I am drawing out the epistemic requirements of a successful do-nothing policy. If, as Sandefur argues, such requirements are rarely, if ever, satisfied, then such policies cannot deliberately realize their goals.¹³ There is nothing here that confronts my argument, which, again, has nothing to do with promoting do-nothing policies. Of course, there are people in the Austrian community – perhaps not serious Austrian scholars, but some on the fringes of the Austrians’ big tent – who use Hayek’s ideas indelicately and who try to argue that the results to which spontaneity leads are necessarily “good” (in some sense). The present author cannot be convicted of this thought crime. I am well aware of the possibility of “negative” spontaneous orders. Indeed, I don’t know how to interpret Chapter Three if not as an appeal to modern Austrians to pay closer attention to this possibility.

Unfortunately, Sandefur chooses not to address the thesis of the logical priority of the epistemic on its own terms. Rather than providing grounds to doubt either my argument from introspection or my argument from the meaning of “can” in principles like *ought implies can*, Sandefur rests his case on the correct, but irrelevant, point that goals are inherently normative, as if I denied this.¹⁴ The question is, what

¹² Ibid., p. 19.

¹³ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁴ Sandefur seems to think that the possibility of learning undermines my introspective argument. It does not. The introspective argument is explicitly framed in the book in terms of what actors “take themselves to be too ignorant

determines whether a course of action appears or does not appear in consciousness, given that some potential courses of action (flying like a bird) do not consciously appear to us as options to consider, while other courses of action (air, rail, automobile, or pedestrian travel) do appear in consciousness? My answer is that our knowledge and ignorance serve to determine whether a course of action is consciously evaluated against normative criteria. Sandefur has no answer. He declares victory on the grounds that political goals emerge without prior consideration of their comparative epistemic burdens, but fails to notice that this is exactly the problem with which I am most concerned. Regardless of whether goals are inherently normative, it is surely possible to have a public discussion about potential policy goals and the political knowledge that is, or is not, available to policymakers with regard to these goals, before crossing into the normative realm of assigning obligations to policymakers to pursue them. This is really all I am suggesting in arguing that, if we want to avoid political disaster, we should reason in politics as we do in our personal lives, from what we know to our potential obligations.

I admit that the methods of analysis suggested in the second part of the book will not lead to infallible knowledge of political knowledge and ignorance. This is not their purpose. Before we can perfect political-epistemological analysis (to the likely limited extent it is at all perfectible), we must start it. As already mentioned, I have no very lofty ambitions for this analysis, beyond learning more than we know now – basically nothing – about policymakers’ epistemic capacities, the limits these place on the effectiveness of deliberate political action, and the prospects for spontaneous forces beyond policymakers’ ken and control to compensate the consequences of their ignorance. I am not suggesting that we shut down or otherwise paralyze governments in lieu of such analysis. Political epistemology is not meant to “stand on its own.”¹⁵ It is meant to clarify – not determine once and for all – what can and cannot be achieved through deliberate political action. Normative political inquiry loses none of its force. It just comes to play a subsidiary role.

4. Reply to Nabors

and too *incapable of learning* enough to achieve” (Scheall, p. 21; italics added).

¹⁵ Sandefur, p. 25.

Professor Nabors builds his criticism on a distinction between the alleged “moderation” of ancient political thinkers and the supposed thoroughgoing “ambition” of their modern descendants, and places my project in the latter, apparently, unjustifiably hubristic, tradition.¹⁶ This is a strange classification of a book the central argument of which is that the problem of policymaker ignorance is general across all political decision-making contexts and must severely restrict our political ambitions, if political disaster is to be avoided.¹⁷ Whatever its other (surely many) sins, arrogantly advocating for ambitious policymaking is not among them. The most unfortunate aspect of his caustic interpretation of the book is that, in the perennial battle between hubris and humility in politics, Professor Nabors and I are in fact fighting in the same army for moderation against the forces of political arrogance and excessive ambition.

I take the question what policymakers can and cannot deliberately realize on the basis of their knowledge and learning capacities to be an empirical question. As implied by the title of his essay and his attack on my empiricism, Professor Nabors apparently believes good government to be deducible from some combination of reason and revelation. Moreover, although I am explicitly agnostic about the correct answer to the empirical question, pending further analysis, my pre-analytical assumption that these epistemic capacities and, thus, the goals achievable on their basis, are quite limited, is apparent throughout the book. Indeed, perhaps the first substantive statement in the book is that

¹⁶ Nabors, p. 30.

¹⁷ As I argue in the book and have argued elsewhere:

We can have a government that is effective in the sense that it regularly meets policy objectives or we can have a government that is ambitious in the sense that it permits the pursuit of comparatively epistemically burdensome policy objectives, but we cannot have both. Until policymakers approach omniscience and omnipotence, governments of the latter kind will always be less effective – they will tend to achieve their objectives less regularly – than will governments of the former kind (p. 180).

Also see Scott Scheall, “Ignorance and the Incentive Structure confronting Policymakers” *Cosmos + Taxis: Studies in Emergent Order and Organization*, 7, no. 1-2 (2019), p. 44.

policymakers are mere human beings and that all human beings are more or less equally epistemically capable (p. *ix*). Yet, Professor Nabors seems to believe, though he offers no argument or evidence, that policymakers are epistemically special.¹⁸ How else to explain his misplaced concern that the core of the book is an argument for perfected – “godlike” – technocracy? Such a thesis would be defensible, on my terms, only if supported by an argument that policymakers possess the knowledge necessary to positively contribute to the realization of utopia. No such argument appears in the book. It is a mystery how Professor Nabors infers an argument for technocracy from what does appear in the book.

Policymakers are neither omniscient nor omnipotent. They are no different in this respect than other cognitively-limited human beings. In the last chapter of the book, I argue that, though we will never make policymakers omniscient and omnipotent – which would be the only full-fledged *solution* to the problem of policymaker ignorance – through empirical inquiry into their knowledge and ignorance, we might make policymakers *functionally* omniscient and omnipotent, by limiting their range of political motion to goals with respect to which their knowledge and learning capacities are adequate to a positive contribution (pp. 158-159). In the absence of the sort of empirical inquiry into policymaker knowledge and ignorance for which I advocate throughout the book, I must remain essentially agnostic about the scale and scope of the goals

¹⁸ Similarly, Nabors’ assertion that the American Founders realized the kind of liberal order that liberals tend to praise obviously begs the question against me. The American political order such as it is (and always has been) is a consequence of the interaction of forces deliberately put in motion by the founders and forces that escaped their constitutional planning. Yet, Nabors unjustifiably attributes American society seemingly entirely to their wisdom. I wonder, does he believe the Founders intended the Civil War? If American government has disintegrated in the way (Nabors, p. 40-41) suggests, then the Constitution as written by the Founders was inadequate to prevent this deterioration. The question then becomes, how might the Founders have written the Constitution to forestall this disintegration? More to the present point, the question is, what knowledge would they have needed to prevent this deterioration and why, if they were as knowledgeable as Nabors seems to think, they did not write a constitution that avoided the disintegration of the American polity? Could it be that the American Founders were liable to the problem of policymaker ignorance?

with respect to which policymakers are functionally omniscient and omnipotent. But, this is to say, again, that the argument for technocracy that Professor Nabors thinks he finds in the book is a figment of his pretence of knowledge.

Articles

A Distinction between the Concepts of Humility and Modesty

William Irwin
King's College, Wilkes-Barre, PA

There is a rich and growing philosophical literature on humility and modesty, but, as Sara Rushing observes, “a fair number of professional philosophers ... conflate humility with modesty without critically reflecting on the implications of treating the two terms as equivalent.”¹ This conflation is unsurprising, because in ordinary language the terms are often used synonymously and interchangeably.² Nonetheless, the

¹ Sara Rushing, “Comparative Humilities: Christian, Contemporary, and Confucian Conceptions of a Political Virtue,” *Polity* 45 (2013), p. 215.

² In the literature philosophers tend to focus on one term or the other, ‘humility’ or ‘modesty’ without considering that there may be a difference between them. Some philosophers note in passing that perhaps there is a difference. Daniel Statman says “There are some differences in the use of these two concepts ..., but I believe that they are relatively minor, and that essentially modesty and humility share the same basic features.” Thus he uses the terms interchangeably in “Modesty, Pride, and Realistic Self-Assessment,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 42 (1992), p. 420. A.T. Nuyen says we should not equate modesty and humility but then does not do much to develop the distinction, instead focusing on modesty in “Just Modesty,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1998), p. 101. Alan T. Wilson says, “It is possible that more work needs to be done to clarify the precise relationship between the trait of modesty and the trait of humility” in “Modesty as Kindness,” *Ratio* 29 (2016), p. 84. Nicholas Dixon says, “Humility differs from modesty, though, in at least one respect. Humility

concepts are distinct.³ Rushing herself does not do the work to distinguish between the concepts of humility and modesty, but her reflection on humility in Christian and Confucian traditions does gesture at the difference that I will argue for: Humility is internal; it is a matter of thought and feeling. Modesty is external; it is a matter of expression. The term ‘humility’ is etymologically connected with the Latin *humus*, meaning earth or soil. Although it can have connotations of lowliness, the concept of humility is perhaps better understood as being “down to earth” in one’s perspective.⁴ The term ‘modesty’ comes from the Latin *modestia* and connotes moderation, propriety, and correctness of conduct, which, as we will see, is appropriate to the concept of modesty.

Reflecting on the etymologies, Fritz Allhoff draws the conclusion that, “Humility entails having a low opinion of oneself whereas modesty entails having a moderate opinion of oneself.”⁵

can take the form of the experience of being humbled, which happens when we are made aware or reminded of our deficiencies ... Modesty is an ongoing disposition, instead of something that can be inflicted on us by an unpleasant realization.” in “Modesty, Snobbery, and Pride,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 39 (2005), p. 419. Nicolas Bommarito takes modesty and humility to be “interchangeable” in “Modesty as a Virtue of Attention,” *Philosophical Review* 122 (2013), p. 93 note 1. Yotam Benziman treats humility and modesty as interchangeable in “The Nature of Modesty,” *Ethical Perspectives* 22 (2015), p. 435 note 3. J.L.A. Garcia says he will treat humility as identical with at least some states of modesty in “Being Unimpressed with Ourselves: Reconceiving Humility,” *Philosophia* 34 (2006), p. 417 note 1. Jennifer Cole Wright, Thomas Nadelhoffer, Lisa Thomson Ross, and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong distinguish between humility and modesty without explaining the distinction or defining modesty in “Be it Ever so Humble: Proposing a Dual-dimension Account and Measurement of Humility,” *Self and Identity* 17 (2018), pp. 95, 96, 98, 101, 111, and 119 note 1.

³ James Kellenberger argues that ‘humility’ is polythetic. I would say the same of ‘modesty’. That is, there is no set of necessary and sufficient conditions to be found among the various uses of the terms. The words are polythetic, but there are nonetheless distinct concepts. Concerning the word ‘humility’ see Kellenberger, “Humility,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 47 (2010), p. 324; Cf. Nancy E. Snow, “Humility,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 29 (1995), pp. 203 ff.

⁴ Joseph Kupfer, “The Moral Perspective of Humility,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 84 (2003), p. 251.

⁵ Fritz Allhoff, “What Is Modesty?” *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 23 (2010), p. 184 note 3.

Jonathan L. Kvanvig rejects Allhoff's claim that the difference between humility and modesty is a matter of degree. Pointing to representative quotations from St. Augustine, Frank Lloyd Wright, Andrew Carnegie, Thomas Jefferson, and others, Kvanvig claims that modesty concerns how one appears to others whereas humility is about one's self-assessment.⁶ More of an argument is needed.

G. Alex Sinha makes a passing wave at the conceptual distinction I will argue for, suggesting that humility is the private side and modesty is the public side; he also recognizes that that the concepts can be separated.⁷ However, Sinha chooses to merge the two concepts and goes on to use the terms 'humility' and 'modesty' interchangeably. Though I find much to agree with in Sinha's and Kvanvig's accounts, I will draw more on others to deliver a unique synthesis of ideas. The result fills a gap in the literature with the first paper devoted entirely to the conceptual distinction and relationship between humility and modesty.

In short, I will argue that humility is the virtue of proper perspective concerning one's talents, gifts, abilities, and accomplishments,⁸ whereas modesty is the virtue of proper expression concerning one's talents, gifts, abilities, and accomplishments.⁹ The star

⁶ Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *Faith and Humility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 178-181.

⁷ G. Alex Sinha makes a passing wave at the distinction in "Modernizing the Virtue of Humility," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 90 (2012), p. 265, where he suggests that humility is the private side and modesty is the public side. He also refers to them as the epistemic and agentic and recognizes that that they can be separated, p. 261.

⁸ Others who define the internal in terms of proper perspective include Norvin Richards, "Is Humility a Virtue?" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 25 (1988), pp. 253-259; Snow, p. 210; and Owen Flanagan, "Virtue and Ignorance," *The Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990), pp. 420-428.

⁹ It may seem unique, and therefore questionable, that there would be two distinct virtues related to the same subject matter, one concerning internal perspective and the other concerning external expression. I do not think that humility and modesty are unique in this regard, however. There are other cases of virtues for which we recognize that internal perspective and external expression do not necessarily need to match. For example, concerning the truth, we may distinguish between the external expression of honesty and the internal

quarterback who, in an interview, shares the proper amount of credit with the team for a victory is modest, at least regarding the credit he deserves, at least on this occasion. If he shares that credit with the team in his own mind, then, all other things being equal, he is also humble regarding the credit, at least on this occasion. Humility and modesty do not have to go together, however. The quarterback could be modest, saying the right things, without being humble, i.e., without thinking or feeling those things. Indeed, as I shall argue, one's expression should not always be an exact reflection of one's internal perspective. Proper expression (modesty) is not always accurate expression.¹⁰

1. Humility

David Hume called humility a “monkish virtue,” and it is not hard to see why.¹¹ ‘Humility’ can have connotations of lowliness and even sinfulness. In this monkish sense, the humble person recognizes how small and insignificant she is and how unworthy of God's grace she is. Even if she is better than most other people in living up to God's commandments, she still falls far short.¹² From a God's eye view, the differences among humans amount to little, and we are all doomed without God's saving grace. If this is what humility is, then we can understand why Hume dismissed it.

perspective on truth, i.e., self-honesty. Thus, I can be untruthful in my spoken words (external) without being self-deceived (internal). Conversely, I can be self-deceived (internal) without being dishonest in my spoken words (external).¹⁰ When I use the word ‘should’ and when I speak of humility and modesty as virtues, I do not mean to speak in moral terms. Rather, I conceive of humility and modesty as practical virtues like punctuality, cleanliness, self-respect, open-mindedness, and politeness. A practical virtue is a trait called for by prudence, one that benefits its possessor. And as I shall argue, it generally benefits the individual to be humble and modest. Of course, others may also conceive of humility and modesty as moral or religious virtues in related senses. I am simply not making the case in those terms here, though some of what I argue may be useful for those who want to conceive of humility and modesty as moral or religious virtues.

¹¹ David Hume *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 270.

¹² Scott Woodcock actually equates humility, as opposed to modesty, with this kind of religious orientation in “The Social Dimensions of Modesty,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 38 (2008), p. 24.

My suggestion is that we can use an Aristotelian framework to conceive of humility as a mean between the deficiency of self-loathing and the excess of vanity.¹³ On my account, humility is a matter of proper perspective built on self-knowledge. Self-knowledge, however, is broader than the proper perspective that amounts to humility.¹⁴ Contrary to Julia Driver, humility is not a matter of ignorance.¹⁵ Yes, there can be something charming about the innocence of the person who does not realize how good or accomplished she is, but that ignorance is not in itself a good thing and should not be held up as a virtue to be emulated, even if that is the way the word ‘humility’ is commonly used. Rather, self-knowledge is an important element of proper perspective and thus humility. This may not seem to follow at first glance. After all, if one is truly good, gifted, talented, or accomplished, then knowing it would seem to preclude humility. This is not necessarily so, however. One does not need to underestimate oneself to be humble; in fact, if one underestimates oneself, then one is simply ignorant or self-deceived, not humble.

One can know how good one is and still be humble when this knowledge takes good fortune into account, thus producing proper perspective. The self-knowledge needed for proper perspective requires a sense of context and appreciation for the sources of one’s talents and abilities. Just as we consider mitigating circumstances in lessening the blame for our failures, so too we must consider good fortune, circumstances, and the help of others when looking at our accomplishments.¹⁶ One had the good fortune to be born with certain

¹³ Others who use an Aristotelian framework for humility and modesty include Nicholas D. Smith, “Modesty: A Contextual Account,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 82 (2008), p. 23; Michael W. Austin, “Is Humility a Virtue in the Context of Sport?” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 31 (2014), p. 204; and Kupfer, p. 266.

¹⁴ Ian M. Church, “The Limitations of the Limitations-Owning Account of Intellectual Humility,” *Philosophia* 45 (2017), p. 1082.

¹⁵ Driver uses the word ‘modesty’ to refer to both the internal and the external. See *Uneasy Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 19. Cf. Julia Driver, “The Virtues of Ignorance,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1989), pp. 373-384.

¹⁶ A.T. Nuyen, “Just Modesty,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1998), 101-109.

genes and to have certain environmental influences. This does not necessarily mean that one had supportive parents, teachers, or coaches. It could mean the opposite in some cases in which lack of support motivated one to work harder. Proper perspective includes recognizing the big picture and the long run. The star student or star athlete may be the best of her class or team, but there is a larger world in which her standing is diminished. And there are other areas of accomplishment, excellence, or success in which she does not measure up quite as well. Even if one were the world's best, proper perspective would produce humility.

At the time of this writing, Usain Bolt is the greatest runner in the 100-meter dash, and so it would be easy for him to lack humility.¹⁷ I do not know if Bolt actually lacks humility, but if he does, then there are certain things he should remind himself about to put things in proper perspective. First, although it is terrific to be that fast, he owes a lot to good genes and coaches. In other words, he owes some of his success to good fortune. It may be impossible for Bolt or anyone to determine exactly how much he owes his success to good fortune, but it will be easy for us to imagine how bad fortune would have prevented success. Bolt could have had a childhood disease or an adult injury that prevented him from becoming a world-class runner. For that matter, any number of unfortunate occurrences could have prevented his success. So, at the very least, he should be mindful of the fact the he owes much of his success to a lack of bad fortune. Second, he will not always be that fast. His ability is fleeting; he will soon enough be surpassed by younger runners. And alas, the records he has set will not last forever. Records are made to be broken as the cliché goes. Proper perspective requires that Bolt not just acknowledge the cliché, but rather that he truly recognize that in the grand sweep of time, he is just a momentary record holder. Recognition of the vastness of time and one's small place in it should be truly humbling. Third, being the fastest runner at the 100-meter dash, is not as important as many other things. Usain Bolt has not cured cancer or brought peace to the Middle East. A passing recognition that there are other greater accomplishments is not enough. For proper perspective, Bolt would need to contemplate and accept that his

¹⁷ Thanks for this example to Austin, p. 211. Flanagan uses the example of the fastest human, p. 425.

accomplishment does not rank all that high in the grander scheme of potential accomplishments. Even though Bolt has earned the right to take proper pride in his accomplishments, he would do well to keep that pride right sized. Indeed, that right-sized, proper pride is proper perspective concerning one's talents, gifts, abilities, and accomplishments. Thus, proper pride is humility. Aristotle describes his great-souled man (*megalopsychos*) as having proper pride, but I disagree with Aristotle on what constitutes proper pride. As will become clear, on my account, even those who are not worthy of great honors can be worthy of feeling proper pride.¹⁸

Usain Bolt is a real-world example, and real human beings have many limitations. For the sake of the argument, though, let us imagine that after retiring from running, Usain Bolt applies his tremendous work ethic to discovering a cure for cancer and bringing peace to the Middle East. Imagine that he succeeds in both endeavors, and imagine that he remains a devoted husband, father, and friend. He would then have surpassed Goethe and da Vinci in the scope of his accomplishments. Nonetheless, it would still be possible for Usain Bolt to be humble. While taking pride in his fantastic accomplishments, he could recognize that there are other diseases he has not cured and other regions of the world to which he has not brought peace. Historians may acclaim him the greatest human being ever to have lived, but he could still recognize that the span of human history is short and hopefully just at its beginning.

With the example of Bolt in mind, let us turn to a consideration of pride, which is often conceived as in opposition to humility.¹⁹ The excessive pride that is synonymous with vanity certainly is opposed to humility, but proper pride is not. Proper pride is humility, and it is simply a matter of feeling appropriately about oneself in light of one's talents, abilities, gifts, and accomplishments.²⁰ Proper pride, humility, is not a matter of thinking less highly of oneself than is warranted. It would be foolish and inappropriate for Usain Bolt not to feel very good about

¹⁸ Staman does *not* adopt the framework of means and extremes, but, like me, he links his account of humility with pride and notes the connection to Aristotle's great-souled man.

¹⁹ Kvanvig takes pride to be the paradigmatic contrast to humility, and he takes vanity to be the paradigmatic contrast to modesty, pp. 178-179.

²⁰ Cf. Benziman, p. 419; Richards, p. 255; and Dixon, 419.

himself. The challenge for Bolt is to keep that feeling right-sized. He has worked hard, accomplished much, and deserves the fame and money that come as the fruit of his labor. He deserves to stand on the podium and have a gold medal hung around his neck while the crowd applauds him. But he would not necessarily deserve to be moved to the top of an organ transplant list, because a person's place on such a list should not necessarily be a function of her accomplishments. Proper pride, humility, calls for Bolt to recognize this. He is ultimately a human being like any other.²¹

Few of us have Bolt's success, but most of us have his temptation to excessive pride or vanity.²² That is why self-knowledge is so important in this context. Humility involves self-knowledge, the product of the Delphic injunction to know thyself. As Michael Austin says, "Humility includes self-knowledge which undermines the ego-driven human tendency to overestimate one's abilities, accomplishments, and character."²³ The faulty perspective of lacking humility ultimately hurts the individual himself who fails to "own" his limitations.²⁴ This is why humility is a practical virtue. The person who

²¹ Mark D. White conceives this equality in Kantian terms in "A Modest Comment on McMullin: A Kantian Account of Modesty," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 40 (2015), pp. 1-5. Thomas Nadelhoffer, Jennifer Cole Wright, Matthew Echols, Tyler Perini, Kelly Venezia, "Some Varieties of Humility Worth Wanting," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 14 (2017), speak of this as "existential awareness," p. 181. Other egalitarian accounts are offered by Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, "The Virtue of Modesty," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (1993), pp. 238-246 and Daniel Statman, "Modesty, Pride and Realistic Self-Assessment," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 42 (1992), pp. 420-438.

²² Jason Brennan, "Modesty without Illusion," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 75 (2007), p. 121. Brennan endorses Adam Smith's view, according to which, "The Smithian modest agent employs the lower standard for others and a higher standard for himself because doing so increases the chances that he will make correct judgments and respond the correct way to the reasons that apply to them." I reject this approach because it is condescending and arrogant to apply a lower standard to others. It makes sense to do it when they are amateurs and you are a professional in a certain area, but otherwise we should all be on the same playing field and subject to the same rules and judgments.

²³ Austin, p. 205.

²⁴ Cf. Dennis Whitcomb, Heather Battaly, Jason Baehr, and Daniel Howard-

lacks humility may, for example, put himself in harm's way, as in the case of the person who overestimates her ability as a skier and takes a trail that is much too challenging for someone of her limited ability. As we shall discuss in the next section, the immodest person hurts others (as well as himself) by giving expression to his improper perspective in the form of boastful speech or presumptuous behavior.

Before proceeding to the effects on others, though, we need to consider more carefully the nature of proper perspective on oneself. Hume says, "nothing is more useful to us in the conduct of life, than a due degree of pride, which makes us sensible to our own merit, and gives us a confidence and assurance in all our projects and enterprises."²⁵ Hitting the mean of proper perspective is difficult, and proper perspective can allow for some inaccuracy. As Hume notes, "a due degree of pride" is helpful "in the conduct of life." In fact, in some circumstances, a slight overestimation of one's abilities may be helpful, as in the case of the confident salesperson or public speaker. But being too far out of touch with reality will likely, ultimately bring bad results. It may seem odd to call a person humble who overestimates some of his abilities, but humility is a delicate balancing act. Conceived as proper perspective, humility can allow for slightly overestimating oneself in some areas. Such balancing cannot be captured in an algorithm. What is most important is that one continues to recognize that fundamentally one's value is the same as that of all other human beings. As we will see in the next section, one can overestimate oneself and yet not be obnoxious. In such benign cases, the overestimation does not result in immodesty but rather appropriate confidence.²⁶

For some people, overestimation in some areas may actually be necessary to hit the mean. Although the dominant human tendency seems to be to overestimate our talents and abilities, some people have the opposite inclination. Those who naturally underestimate their talents

Snyder, "Intellectual Humility: Owning Our Limitations," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 94 (2017), pp. 509-539.

²⁵ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Lewis A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), pp. 596-597.

²⁶ Wilson, p. 81. As Wilson says, "The modest agent can even *overestimate* their own level of ability."

and abilities will need to exaggerate them in their own minds in order to achieve an accurate assessment. Other people would be better served by slight underestimation because it can inspire improvement. In sum, there is no one-size-fits-all prescription when it comes to achieving the proper perspective that is humility.

Conceiving humility as a matter of proper perspective means that a person who is terribly deficient in some way but realizes it, can nonetheless be humble. For example, a bad teacher who realizes he is a bad teacher is humble with regard to his teaching abilities. Of course, this humility is overshadowed by his bad teaching. Nevertheless, we all know bad teachers who lack humility with regard to their teaching. Thus it makes sense to say of the bad teacher who recognizes his lack of ability, “at least he is humble about it.”

2. Modesty

As we have seen, humility is internal, and its direct consequences are personal. By contrast, modesty is external, and its direct consequences are interpersonal. Modesty helps us to avoid causing others pain, envy, and resentment. Immodesty can have advantages in some cases; some people are taken in and fooled by braggarts. And immodesty can even be charming in cases like Muhammad Ali’s poetic boasting. Modesty is thus a practical virtue with its eye on the big picture and the long run. Bragging and other immodest behavior may fool some of the people some of the time, but prudence counsels modesty for most people in most situations.

As with humility, we can conceive of modesty as a mean; it is the mean between an excess, called immodesty, and a deficiency, called self-denigration. Modesty is proper expression based on assessment of one’s talents, gifts, abilities, and accomplishments. It may be selective rather than total. As Driver says, “Persons are typically modest only in some respect or other—that is, they are modest regarding their work accomplishments, or hobbies, or specific skills, and so forth.”²⁷ Modesty benefits its possessor by helping her to get along with others, by not making others feel uncomfortable and (mis)judged. If human nature were not infected with envy, then modesty would be far less important

²⁷ Julia Driver, “Modesty and Ignorance,” *Ethics* 109 (1999), p. 830.

and valuable. Curiously, envy is usually directed at those just a little above us in status or accomplishment. For example, Driver notes that she is unlikely to be envious of Michael Jordan for his basketball abilities, but she is likely to become envious of her sister for winning neighborhood tennis matches.²⁸ Because human nature inclines us to be concerned with status, it is uncomfortable to be around someone who is immodest—his expression of elevated judgment of himself suggests lower judgment of us. Modesty thus requires you to “present your accomplishments/positive attributes in a way that is sensitive to the potential negative impact on the well-being of others.”²⁹ Gauging the appropriate presentation is not always easy. Because modesty is expected, sometimes a modest statement may not seem modest enough. We are often expected to understate ourselves, but sometimes we do not understate ourselves enough to satisfy others.

To a certain extent, modesty is context relative—modesty demands one thing with friends and another thing with strangers. It may demand one thing at one time or place and another thing at another time or place.³⁰ In some cases, sharing one’s honest self-assessment would be modest, whereas in other cases it would be immodest. Ironically, modesty may oblige a person to understate her self-assessment in order to spare someone else who is not properly humble from envy or ego-deflation. By contrast, certain contexts, for example job interviews, may call for a person to speak in ways that might be considered immodest in other contexts. Indeed, in a job interview, one can be modest in slightly over-stating one’s self-assessment. And among family or friends, it may actually be improper *not* to mention an accomplishment. As Scott Woodcock observes, “A close friend may be hurt by an agent who acts modestly when they interact, because by acting this way the agent reveals that she does not trust her friend to be vicariously pleased by the greatness of the agent’s accomplishments.”³¹ In fact, among friends a modest person need not be overly modest about her own modesty. As Ty Raterman says, “There is nothing odd about asserting ‘I am modest’ during a quiet conversation with a good friend about personal qualities

²⁸ Driver, p. 829.

²⁹ Wilson, p. 78.

³⁰ Cf. Sinha, p. 273.

³¹ Woodcock, p. 28.

one values possessing.”³² Indeed, there is nothing necessarily contradictory or self-refuting about such a statement.

Modesty is bound up with manners and honesty. Sensitivity often requires moderate expression that understates self-regard. In many cases, external expression should be lower than internal perspective. Even if one is humble, and thus one’s internal perspective is appropriate, it still may be hurtful to communicate one’s honest self-appraisal. For example, Julia’s sister Debby may know she is a better tennis player than Julia, but modesty may still oblige Debby to downplay her success in neighborhood matches so as not to arouse Julia’s envy. Part of Debby’s motivation may be that she recognizes that her tennis ability is a small thing that does not make her a more valuable person than her sister. As Irene McMullin says, “Modest people communicate this self-understanding through behavior motivated by the desire to ensure that their accomplishments do not cause pain to others. Through this tendency to de-emphasize their accomplishments, they communicate that they do not in fact believe they are ‘better’ than others, though they recognize that they do in fact rank higher on the particular social standard in question.”³³ In a sense, modesty can sometimes involve a slight deception in the service of communicating respect and regard. As Woodcock says, “It is possible for a person to knowingly regulate the way that she presents herself to others without being insincere.”³⁴ The deception sometimes involved in modesty can be sincere in its intent to communicate respect and regard, but it is still deception. For example, someone may say to a prolific author, “I really enjoyed your book.” Rather than ask, “Which book?”, the author may respond modestly by saying, “Thank you. It means a lot to me that you took the time and effort to read the book. I realize there are some boring parts.” The author’s response is deceptive; it implies that the author knows which book the reader means. Further, the response may elicit more details that will clarify which book is meant, and that will allow the author to thank the reader more fully. The response spares the reader from embarrassment

³² Ty Raterman, “On Modesty: Being Good and Knowing It without Flaunting It,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 43 (2006), p. 232.

³³ Irene McMullin, “A Modest Proposal: Accounting for the Virtuosity of Modesty,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 60 (2010), p. 783.

³⁴ Woodcock, p. 11.

at not realizing that the author had written more than one book. Beyond that, the response spares the author from immodesty. In a perfect world populated by perfect people such deception would be unnecessary. A humble person, with proper perspective on her talents and accomplishments, could be completely honest and unfiltered in expressing her proper pride. We are not, however, perfect people. So, deception may be necessary when we are humble, and it may be even more necessary when we are not humble. Of course, deception is not always necessary. Many times, it is possible to be sensitive and communicate respect and regard without being deceptive or false.

False modesty can be obnoxious when it is obvious.³⁵ Too often, major award winners provide us with prime examples of cringeworthy false modesty, but we find such examples in the everyday world as well. When detected, false modesty may be insulting, condescending, or patronizing, but it is not necessarily so—and it may be preferable to boasting or other immodest displays. Hume seems to justify false modesty, saying, “some disguise in this particular is absolutely requisite; and ... if we harbor pride in our breasts, we must carry a fair outside and have the appearance of modesty and mutual deference in all our conduct and behavior.”³⁶

We can be modest as we can be polite, without it reflecting a state of mind. We do not speak about false manners, so why do we speak of false modesty? In fact, we appreciate etiquette when we know it is difficult, as, for example, we appreciate the good sportsmanship of shaking hands after the game all the more when we know it is difficult. It is not always blameworthy when inside and outside do not match. Listening to a young athlete being interviewed after a game, we can get the impression that the athlete is speaking lines she has practiced in giving credit to her teammates. There is no harm or blame here. By saying these words repeatedly the athlete may come to see their truth. Consider the star quarterback. If he lacks humility, then false modesty is appropriate. Repeatedly telling the press that his receivers deserve credit for the win may even help the quarterback to act his way into a

³⁵ Cf. Sinha, p. 264.

³⁶ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Lewis A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 598.

new way of thinking. Treating people with respect can (with time and repetition) lead to feeling respect for them. Likewise, speaking and acting modestly can lead to humility, though not always. It remains true that plenty of modest people are not humble. They may be on their way to humility, but not all will reach that destination. In any event, recent empirical work concludes that “the folk concept of modesty seems to be primarily behavioral, rather than psychological. . . . most people attribute modesty to someone so long as she *says* something modest, regardless of her private assessments, motives, or beliefs about her own accomplishments.”³⁷ This does not mean that people are ordinarily careful about distinguishing between the words ‘humility’ and ‘modesty’, but it does suggest they would be receptive to my conceptual distinction between humility and modesty.

The upshot is that much of what is called false modesty is true and sincere in its goal of not causing harm or envy, even though it does not emanate from humility. There is a problematic form of “false modesty,” however, the kind of expression that would be better called “fake modesty,” an obvious sham. Think of the so-called “humble brag” whereby one communicates something impressive about oneself by couching it in false self-deprecation. For example, “I’m so absentminded. I almost forgot to send Harvard the deposit for my daughter’s enrollment.” Humble bragging is doubly obnoxious for its transparent attempt to deceive the listener into thinking one is not bragging. McMullin describes false modesty as “the dishonest and patronizing attempt to communicate to others that one does not believe one’s success to be definitive evidence of being better than they are, when in fact one *does* believe it.”³⁸ But what McMullin describes is fake modesty. Most of us are probably fooled by garden variety false modesty most of the time, and that is fine. Just as we are willing to accept false manners, we should be willing to accept false modesty. The real thing may be better in both cases, but there is a courtesy implicit in the deception. Well-meaning false modesty is a key ingredient in the glue that holds society together. As Nicolas Bommarito says, false modesty

³⁷ Sara Weaver, Mathieu Doucet, and John Turri, “It’s What’s on the Inside that Counts . . . Or is It?: Virtue and the Psychological Criteria of Modesty,” *Review of Philosophy and Psychiatry* 8 (2017), p. 655.

³⁸ McMullin, pp. 788-789.

“can often have good consequences by allowing people to get along better ... False modesty can also be the result of genuine good motives, such as the desire to spare another person’s feelings. ... It can also play a role in moral development—an important way to acquire many valuable traits is first to act as if you have a trait.”³⁹ Just as manners, false or not, hold society together and improve individuals, so too does modesty, false or not. Thus false modesty is effective in its social function. We are aware that it is pervasive, and yet we are regularly fooled by it, often willingly so. The best false modesty is sincere in its desire to avoid causing harm or envy, even if it is not an accurate reflection of internal perspective. Thus, unlike fake or transparent false modesty, the best false modesty is not obnoxious or perniciously deceptive. Quite the contrary, it is courteous and imperceptible.

We should note that because modesty is a matter of expression, one can be immodest in expression even when one is deficient in the proper pride that constitutes humility. For example, some braggarts boast out of a sense of insecurity; they do not feel proper pride. Similarly, some humble people do not manage to express themselves modestly. This can happen, for example, because a person is nervous or because the person does not know the etiquette required by a situation. In yet other cases, modest behavior can be mistaken for immodesty: we have all met that guy who appears stuck-up but is really just shy. Humility combined with introversion can be mistaken for snootiness and thus immodesty. Most humble people are unambiguously modest, but plenty of people who are modest in speech are not humble. It is tempting to think that if one avoids bragging and avoids sham displays of fake modesty, then one is modest. Such is not necessarily the case, however. Just as you do not necessarily have to tell someone that you are in pain for them to know it, you do not have to boast, condescend, or patronize for someone to know that you are vain. Lack of humility can come out sideways in behavior, manifesting as immodesty, and it is a failure of self-knowledge not to realize it. Body language, actions, and indirect speech can express improper perspective. Think of the polite waiter who clearly wants to spit in your soup. He goes through the proper motions and says the right things, but there is still a haughtiness about his behavior that shouts, “I am too good to be serving someone like you.”

³⁹ Bommarito, p. 112.

What is the solution? Should we become better thespians? Perhaps, to the extent that we wish to act our way into proper perspective. Ideally, modesty would be rooted in humility. But if we are imperfect in our humility we can at least be aware of that as a fault, and we can be aware that our lack of humility may find expression in immodest behavior, even if only subtly and indirectly. To the extent that we wish to get along well with others and avoid causing them envy or resentment, we are well motivated to rein in immodesty. Modesty takes discipline just as manners do, but modesty, like manners, can become habitual and automatic. To the extent that the relationship between modesty and humility is recursive, the discipline in practicing modesty can help develop the proper perspective of humility, thus making it easier in turn to be modest—a virtuous circle if ever there was one.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ For helpful criticisms and suggestions, I wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for this journal. In addition, for their helpful feedback, I thank Jim Ambury, Mike Austin, Greg Bassham, Kyle Johnson, Megan Lloyd, and Mark White.

Book Review

Lukianoff, Greg, and Jonathan Haidt. *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*. New York: Penguin Press, 2018.

When *The Coddling of the American Mind* was published in 2018, Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt penned something more prescient than they could have imagined. For those bewildered by a sharp spike in “cancel culture” in the United States during 2020—an already unusual year by any standard, with a global pandemic and lockdowns, economic disruptions, racial-tension-fueled protests and riots, and another contentious U.S. Presidential election cycle—this book is a good place to seek understanding. No phenomenon emerges from the blue, nor does it usually have one simple explanation. Lukianoff and Haidt provide a six-fold causal analysis of disturbing educational, social, and political changes that were afoot in the early-to-mid 2010s. That juggernaut is picking up steam, making it imperative (especially for Americans) to grapple with their diagnosis and recommended prescriptions.

A sea change occurred in 2013, when Lukianoff (a First Amendment lawyer and President and CEO of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education) noticed that college students began calling for restricting, monitoring, and disallowing certain speech based on content (pp. 5-6). Their justification is that the ideas contained in the undesired speech make them “feel unsafe,” so they have to be protected against it with “trigger warnings” and “safe spaces” on campus (p. 6). They even equate such speech with violence or harm (e.g., “microaggressions”), making some feel justified in creating social media mobs to “call out” those whose ideas make them feel uncomfortable (now escalated to “cancel culture”¹), using the “heckler’s veto” to

¹ “Cancel culture” uses especially social media platforms to “call out” or shame rather than engage in discussion with individuals who hold or are accused of

disrupt classes or to shout down speakers who they were unsuccessful in getting “disinvited,” or even joining Antifa-led violence and riots to ramp up pressure to change college policy. A series of high-profile events occurred during 2016-2017 (at, e.g., University of California, Berkeley; Evergreen State College; Reed College; and Middlebury College) that variously illustrate these hostile actions (see chaps. 4-5). At the same time as all of this was going on, teen anxiety, depression, and suicide were rising at an alarming rate and overwhelming college mental health services (pp. 149-51).

What was going on during 2013-2017? Lukianoff and Haidt unravel this mystery by understanding those who came of age in 2013: known as iGen, they are those born in 1995 and after and who grew up in the age of smartphones and social media. In Chapters 1-3, Lukianoff and Haidt (a social psychologist) identify three bad ideas—which they call “Great Untruths”—pervasive among iGen that have led to intimidation, violence, and “witch hunts” in academia (documented in Chapters 4 and 5). The bulk of their study, in Chapters 6-11, is devoted to teasing out six interlocking causes to explain this recent trend. While expressing deep concern over what is going on with iGen, in Chapters 12 and 13 they offer constructive recommendations for parents and educators and conclude on a hopeful note.

What makes a belief rise to the level of a Great Untruth is that it clashes with ancient wisdom, conflicts with the findings of modern psychology on the nature of well-being, and harms those who embrace it (p. 4). The three Great Untruths ubiquitous among iGen and unleashing damage for themselves, across academia, and in the culture at large are: (1) the “Untruth of Fragility: What doesn’t kill you makes you weaker” (chap. 1), (2) the “Untruth of Emotional Reasoning:

holding disfavored ideas; see “Cancel Culture,” s.v. *Urban Dictionary*, accessed online at: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Cancel%20Culture>. This phenomenon has been escalated to include targeting those who are *silent*, on the ground that “silence is violence”; see, e.g., Baron Schwartz, “Silence Is Violence,” *Xaprb Blog* (February 23, 2019), accessed online at: <https://www.xaprb.com/blog/silence-is-violence/>, and Mick Hume, “No, Silence Is Not Violence,” *Spiked* (June 16, 2020), accessed online at: <https://www.spiked-online.com/2020/06/16/no-silence-is-not-violence/>.

Always trust your feelings” (chap. 2), and (3) the “Untruth of Us Versus Them: Life is a battle between good people and evil people” (chap. 3). Lukianoff and Haidt counter each of these Great Untruths with conclusions based on their own experience as well as on research conducted by Haidt and other prominent social scientists. Along with Nassim Taleb,² they argue that humans are “antifragile” and thus “*need* physical and mental challenges and stressors” (p. 22), else our capacities for resilience and growth will become diminished and atrophy. Emotional reasoning takes many forms (e.g., catastrophizing, overgeneralizing, mind reading, etc.), causing cognitive distortions that lead to crippling self-doubt and fear of “the Other.” In order to break this vicious cycle, the authors lean on Aaron Beck’s cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)³ (which literally saved Lukianoff’s life, when he was suicidal [pp. 143-44]). CBT involves practicing a “talking back” process whereby one pauses when experiencing emotional reasoning, raises questions about the source and grounds of the emotions and the beliefs they give rise to, changes one’s interpretation in light of evidence, which then changes one’s subsequent emotions, thinking, etc. (pp.36-40). Lukianoff and Haidt see the Untruth of Us Versus Them as driven in part by a sociobiological theory that the “human mind is prepared for tribalism” (p. 58)⁴ and by a Marxist/Marcusean “common-enemy identity politics” that sees the social world in terms of a zero-sum struggle for power (pp. 62-71). They advocate, instead, “common-humanity identity politics” as the most effective way to rise above tribalism and to strive for durable conditions of justice and equality (pp. 60-62 and 74-76).

Driving these damaging Untruths, explain Lukianoff and Haidt, is a six-fold causal explanation:

² See esp. Nassim Taleb, *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder* (New York: Random House, 2012).

³ See, e.g., Aaron Beck, *Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders* (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1975).

⁴ This view is defended by Jonathan Haidt in his *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012).

(1) The polarization cycle (chap. 6): The wider U.S. society has become increasingly polarized, with “the left and the right locked into a game of mutual provocation and reciprocal outrage” (p. 127). The acrimonious 2016 Presidential election cycle was the first one in which iGen could vote, which provided many occasions for tensions to escalate on campuses across the country. The callout culture and “echo chambers” of social media platforms served to concentrate the vitriol and pour gasoline on these fires.

(2) Anxiety and depression (chap. 7): They summarize Jean Twenge’s multifaceted research behind the data on rising rates (especially among girls) of anxiety, depression, and suicide.⁵ A combination of “helicopter parenting,” an increase in screen time on smart phones you can carry at all times in your pocket, the deleterious effects of addictive social media, and a decrease in physical activity has stunted the emotional and psychological growth of American children. Girls have become especially prone to mental health problems due to their being more “relationally aggressive” than boys and hence more vulnerable to the “fear of being left out” that social media exacerbates (pp. 146-56).

(3) Paranoid parenting (chap. 8): Although iGen lives in a safer U.S. than their parents did, many parents believe that the world is a hostile place that they need to protect their children from. High-profile cases in the 1980s of child abduction and murder (e.g., Etan Patz and Adam Walsh) scared primarily middle-class parents into “helicoptering” over their children’s every step. Researchers such as Lenore Skenazy and Erika Christakis argue that these modern parenting strategies are “preventing kids from growing strong and independent” (p. 165).⁶

(4) The decline of play (chap. 9): As if fears of violent crime against children weren’t enough, parents increasingly dominated their

⁵ Jean Twenge, *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us* (New York: Atria Books, 2017).

⁶ Lenore Skenazy launched the Free-Range Kids movement (and hosts a blog by that name at: <https://www.freerangekids.com/>); Erika Christakis is author of *The Importance of Being Little: What Young Children Really Need from Grownups* (New York: Viking, 2016).

children's outside-of-school time with test prep and extracurricular activities calculated to position them for spots in Ivy League colleges (pp. 186-91). As researcher Peter Gray bemoans, the "free play" so necessary for healthy human development has all but vanished for many children, as schools have shifted to follow parents' concerns (pp. 183-86).

(5) The bureaucracy of "safetyism" (chap. 10): Factors (1)-(4) have created iGen's demand, beginning around 2013, to "feel emotionally safe" on college campuses. Consequently, and in conjunction with the explosive growth in the number and size of universities, the bloated administrative structures of universities have pandered to their customers' (i.e., students' and their parents') desire to be protected from anything uncomfortable—including ideas they don't like. Higher education's fears of bad publicity and threats of litigation have led to university speech-code policies such as those Lukianoff and Haidt identify in Chapters 4 and 5. Those in turn have a "chilling effect" on speech and cause self-censorship in the places most damaged by it (pp. 200-206).

(6) The quest for justice (chap. 11): News media's sensationalist journalism is also complicit in creating "safetyism" on campus, as many young people are influenced by such sources in their developing "sense of justice" (pp. 214-17). Such media have reflected not only the increasingly divisive American political climate, but also social justice activists' shift from seeking "equal access" to "equal outcomes." The latter requires constant monitoring and "adjustment" in order to satisfy the demands of justice, regardless of what actually causes such inequality (pp. 224-30).

No one of these causes would have been sufficient to unleash the "perfect storm" that hit the U.S. with such fury. Together, their damage is still being felt.

Lukianoff and Haidt spend the vast majority of *The Coddling of the American Mind* getting to the bottom of the problem, but they offer a couple of brief chapters in which they prescribe some practical solutions. They encourage parents to "prepare the child for the road, not

the road for the child” by providing their children with “the gift of experience” through unsupervised “free play” (p. 237). This will allow children to develop antifragility by learning how to assess risk, navigate conflict, and calibrate their emotions in relation to evidence. They urge educators to endorse the 2015 “Chicago Statement on Principles of Free Expression” (pp. 255 and 279-81); stay true to the “telos [i.e., purpose] of a university,” which is to seek truth and transmit knowledge; and to resist forces that would hijack that telos in service to “progress, change, or making the world a better place” (pp. 253-54). The educational process “is easily corrupted,” when scholars and students are discouraged from “ask[ing] the wrong questions” or discovering “inconvenient facts” that don’t fit the narrative upheld by social justice activists (p. 254). Lukianoff and Haidt end on a hopeful note by pointing to Steven Pinker’s and Matt Ridley’s views that things are getting better, progress marches on, and we have every reason for optimism.⁷ They even see a few “green shoots” of positive change: some social media giants are trying to rein in the monsters they have created, Utah passed a “free-range parenting” bill, some scholars are challenging common-enemy identity politics, and some universities are endorsing the Chicago Statement (pp. 265-68).

There is much to commend in Lukianoff and Haidt’s *The Coddling of the American Mind*, which all parents and educators would do well to read. I will focus on what I regard as the three most valuable contributions they make to understanding iGen’s impact on the American higher-education landscape: explaining (1) the role that “concept creep” plays in shifting speech codes, (2) how social justice activism and common-enemy identity politics have undermined the purpose of the university, and (3) how helicopter parenting has devastated child development.

Lukianoff and Haidt rely on Nick Haslam’s work⁸ to analyze several ways in which concepts such as “safety” (pp. 24-27),

⁷ See Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Viking, 2017), and Matt Ridley, *The Rational Optimist: How Prosperity Evolves* (New York: Harper, 2010).

⁸ Nick Haslam, “Concept Creep: Psychology’s Expanding Concepts of Harm and Pathology,” *Psychological Inquiry* 27, no. 1 (2016), pp. 1-17.

“aggression” (pp. 40-46), and “violence” (pp. 84-86) (among many others) have been subject to “concept creep” in the academic context. This occurs when a concept’s “scope has expanded in two directions . . . ‘downward’, to apply to less severe situations, and ‘outward’, to encompass new but conceptually related phenomena” (p. 25). The Orwellian equivocation of speech with violence, of making safety about emotional comfort rather than physical security, and of ignoring the role of intent in determining whether someone has uttered aggressive or threatening language have radically changed campus speech codes for the worse. Despite the best of intentions and without a malevolent bone in their bodies, students and teachers alike can be called out and even expelled or fired if what they say or write makes someone else “feel unsafe.” It’s no wonder that many who attend or work at universities report that they self-censor, feel like they are “walking on eggshells,” or retreat into silence (see pp. 71-73 and the research cited therein). Such attitudes and behavior belie the purpose of education, which brings me to the next point.

Educational institutions *are* supposed to be safe spaces, that is, spaces in which it is safe for individuals to flex and develop their intellectual muscles as they read, try out, scrutinize, and reject or adopt newly encountered ideas. Discourse and research need room to be expressed and pursued fearlessly within the bounds of civility and according to the most rigorous, objective standards of evidence-based reasoning. Reality, not feelings, is the ultimate arbiter of whether claims are true or false. Given how difficult it is to achieve knowledge, that each individual must achieve knowledge for one’s self, and that there are many ways in which we each can fall into cognitive error, it is vital that all claims be on the table for open discussion. Privileging the conclusions of social justice activists or allowing the purpose of an educational institution to play second fiddle to larger social issues perverts the very process by which any such conclusions could be justified. Individual students, teachers, and staff are free to believe what they wish and pursue whatever conception of justice they endorse outside of the educational setting. However, within the walls of “the ivory tower,” every individual mind is sacred. Respecting that requires maintaining epistemological conditions of intellectual freedom and promoting ideological diversity.

Volumes could—and have been—written about how problematic, however well intentioned, helicopter parenting is. Lukianoff and Haidt cite throughout their book a number of recent studies on how children can develop resilience, grit, and antifragility only through feedback loops provided by direct experience with life’s many risks (within age-appropriate limits).⁹ They take their analysis a step further by integrating Steve Horwitz’s insight about the implications helicopter parenting has for politics: “parenting strategies and laws that make it harder for kids to play on their own pose a serious threat to liberal societies by flipping our default setting from ‘figure out how to solve this conflict on your own’ to ‘invoke force and/or third parties whenever conflict arises’” (p. 192).¹⁰ While they don’t put it this way, helicopter parenting is a pathway to popular demand not only for a “safe” university, but also for “the nanny state” and socialist political policies.

Despite this book’s many virtues, I have a few concerns. First, while I am sympathetic with much of the research that Lukianoff and Haidt draw on from Twenge (and others) to explain social media’s role in the teen mental health crisis, some of it falls short. For example, they argue that what may account for girls being more adversely affected than boys by social media is that social media provides more occasions for girls—who are allegedly more “relationally aggressive”—to draw negative comparisons between themselves and the “curated” lives and “filtered” photos of their friends, leading to feelings of low self-esteem and “fear of being left out” (pp. 154-55). This fails to explain, though, *why* it is that viewing others on social media causes such feelings. Those with healthy self-esteem and a strong sense of self would not care what

⁹ As Maria Montessori put it nearly a century earlier, “the child is the father of the man.” A child’s confidence in his ability to live in the world without adults or the state leaping in to “solve” his every problem comes from the knowledge and character achieved by him through the “work” he does to understand himself and how the world works. See, e.g., Maria Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, trans. Joseph Costelloe (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972 [1936]).

¹⁰ Citing Steve Horwitz, “Cooperation over Coercion: The Importance of Unsupervised Childhood Play for Democracy and Liberalism,” *Cosmos + Taxis* (2015), pp. 3-16; quotation at p. 10.

anyone else looks like, so perhaps it is previous low self-esteem that causes increases in anxiety and depression—and *that* is what needs a deeper explanation. Also, this research (at least as presented here) does not take into account how many boys make negative comparisons between themselves and other males, such as is explored in *The Adonis Complex*.¹¹ Whether it is girls or boys who are experiencing increasing rates of anxiety or depression, the underlying culprit may be something very different from what these researchers point to.

My second concern is that Lukianoff and Haidt might overestimate how much influence teachers have over children and underestimate the power of parental example. They spill much ink on suggestions for parents to get their children in the right educational setting and to let them experience more unsupervised “free play.” This is no doubt good advice. However, there is far more power in something they mention in passing than the space they devote to it suggests, namely, modeling and encouraging “productive disagreement.” They mention that Adam Grant notes how “most creative people grew up in homes full of arguments, yet few parents today teach their children how to argue productively” (p. 240). Seeing and experiencing firsthand at home from a young age the give-and-take of constructive criticism without taking it personally would instill and reinforce epistemic virtues that children could carry with them to other settings.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, I think that Lukianoff and Haidt overlook a likely contributing cause to iGen’s troubles: mass public education. Since widespread public education has been expanding in the U.S. for nearly a century, it is easy to have a blindspot here. However, lurking behind several of the causes that they point to—such as increasing test anxiety, decreasing free play, invidious social comparison, etc.—is the fact that these detrimental trends are entrenched in the public school system, with its state-controlled, cookie-cutter curriculum; age-segregated classrooms; and teaching-to-the test, soul-killing pedagogy. Many of those who support Skenazy’s Free-Range Kids movement reject this system and are ardent defenders of alternative

¹¹ Harrison Pope, Katharine Phillips, and Roberto Olivardia, *The Adonis Complex: How to Identify, Treat, and Prevent Body Obsession in Men and Boys* (New York: Free Press, 2000).

education models, such as homeschooling, unschooling, Montessori, etc. They seek out these small-scale, agency-centered approaches to learning precisely because they believe them to be effective in providing the conditions children need to create flourishing lives for themselves rather turning into coddled and fearful adults unable to face life.

The key message of this book suggests an alternate title: *Safetyism Isn't Safe*. Unsafe for whom and for what purpose? For children, students, and citizens who aspire to be healthy, independent, free-thinking humans living under conditions of freedom and prosperity. Safetyism is also unsafe for schools and universities that aspire to uphold the purpose of education, namely, to create and foster the conditions necessary for seeking truth and achieving knowledge. Lukianoff and Haidt have provided some hard-earned gems of wisdom that all individuals can benefit from, but—in keeping with their deeper analysis—those insights are really gained by each of us while facing challenges in the rough-and-tumble of life.

Carrie-Ann Biondi
Higher Ground Education