




Understanding of the norm of political discourse

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Abstract

It is argued that understanding is the norm of political discourse, and it is shown why political assertions can be epistemically problematic within a liberal democracy even when asserted knowledgeably.

Keywords Understanding · Assertion · Political liberalism · Epistemology · Epistemic norms

§1

Liberal democracies are increasingly threatened by the rise of fake news and political misinformation, which poses a challenge to political philosophers and social epistemologists who aim to characterise appropriate epistemic standards of political discourse. This article aims to make new headway on this front. First, it is shown that—at least within a framework of political liberalism—political belief based on mere deference is defective in an important sense: it cannot support politically legitimate action, and this is so even when these purely deferential political beliefs are knowledgeable. From this starting point, it is argued that, on the assumption that assertion has the function to generate good belief, political assertion within such democracies plausibly has the function to generate *understanding*, not mere knowledge. Moreover, the most reliable way to achieve *function fulfilment*, in normal conditions, in the case of political assertion, is by its being *sourced* in understanding on the part of the speaker. From here there is a very short step—one linking functions and norms—to the overarching conclusion of the paper: that *understanding* is the norm of political discourse. An attractive payoff of this view is that it helps us to make sense of various ways in which certain political speech is defective when it is, and defective in a way that is both epistemically as well as politically significant.

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Here is the plan for what follows. §2 suggests how political legitimacy, within the framework of political liberalism, depends in important ways on understanding and not merely knowledge; §3 shows how the key idea in §2 bears on norms governing political *belief*. §4 briefly reviews some current thinking about assertion generally and its functions; §5 combines these general ideas about assertion with conclusions from §4 to get the result that political assertion—at least within a political liberalist framework—has the *function* to generate understanding, not mere knowledge. §§6–9 connect functions with norms in order to establish the thesis that *understanding is the norm of political assertion*. A pleasing consequence of the position argued for here is that it will allow us to make sense of (among other things) why political assertions can be epistemically problematic within a liberal democracy, even when knowledgeably delivered.

§2

One of the central tenets of liberal political philosophy is the *endorsement constraint* (e.g., Dworkin, 2002; Kymlicka, 1989) according which, put roughly, the political legitimacy of institutions depends on their being able to be endorsed by those subject to them, including those with differing value frameworks. It is contentious exactly what kind or quality of endorsement suffices here, however a familiar idea among political liberals is that such endorsement is legitimate only if suitably *autonomous*—viz., “only if the citizens see themselves as fully able to *reflectively endorse* or reject such shared principles, and to do so competently and with adequate information . . . and *according to reasons* and motives that are taken as one’s own” (Christman, 2020, my italics).¹

This core insight of political liberalism is suggestive of an easily overlooked *epistemological* constraint that plausibly falls out of the above endorsement constraint. The epistemological constraint, to a first approximation, is that autonomous endorsement *asymmetrically* entails knowledgeable endorsement. Presumably one at least needs to *know* adequate information if she is to competently and autonomously endorse political principles in the way that matters for satisfying the political liberal’s endorsement constraint. But—and here is what is easily overlooked—*mere* knowledge is plausibly not enough. The reason is that, as contemporary work in social epistemology demonstrates, knowledge (e.g., including about political principles and institutions) can be achieved via simply trusting testimony *without one’s ever reflecting on or possessing any further background information*, including—importantly for the political liberal—even *reasons* that one takes as one’s own.

For example, according to the standard (and widely-endorsed) *anti-reductionist* position in the epistemology of testimony, one can gain knowledge from a reliable speaker simply by trusting their testimony, provided that one lacks any positive reason

¹ It is worth noting that minimal ideas attributed to political liberalism are compatible with some of the key insights of Habermas’s (1984) conception of political legitimacy, as detailed in his theory of communicative action, which requires among other things that individuals recognise the intersubjective validity of the kinds of claims that social cooperation depends upon. That said, the details of Habermas’s own position, including the details of his preferred discourse theory (and of the activity discursive justification), are, as I see it, not required in order to embrace the kind of core insight I’m beginning with, even if such discourse could help to facilitate understanding. Thanks to a reviewer for registering the point of connection with Habermas.

to doubt their competence or sincerity. It follows from anti-reductionism, then, that an unreflective, uncritical, and *barely* informed thinker would be nonetheless positioned to *knowledgeably* endorse some particular political principle or institution, and indeed might do exactly this by voting *on a reliable testifier's sheer say-so* about what candidate or policy is best. Such knowledgeable endorsement, however, falls short of grounding *political legitimacy* as political liberals understand it.

What all this suggests, then, is a stronger epistemic constraint than mere *knowledge* on the kind of endorsement that matters for political legitimacy on political liberalism.

The most natural candidate here is *understanding*, where understanding is often taken to require more than mere propositional knowledge of the sort one could gain unreflectively via testimony. For example, according to Alison Hills (2009) understanding requires (in addition to knowledge) *abilities* that allow one to employ the relevant piece of information beyond the issue at hand. As Hills puts it: "To understand why p you must have an ability to draw conclusions about similar cases, and to work out when a different conclusion would hold if the reasons why p were no longer the case." These are all things that mere propositional knowledge doesn't ensure that one is able to do. Likewise, according to Elgin (2017) and Gordon (e.g. 2016), understanding requires a 'grasping component' the satisfaction of which itself plausibly requires a certain type of know-how (e.g., to manipulate the relevant information one has and use it for one's relevant purposes) which is not reducible to know-that. Notice that the above views of what understanding demands line up snugly with—and much more so than knowledge does—what it is that the political liberal says must be involved in the legitimate, autonomous endorsement of political principles and institutions. Both understanding and such autonomous endorsement plausibly require a reflective appreciation of the reasons one has, and an ability to see how those reasons support what it is that one is endorsing. Knowledge ensures none of these things, but understanding does.

What the foregoing suggests, then, is a very general idea about the relationship between political legitimacy within the framework of political liberalism and understanding, which is that the former *requires* the latter. This general idea is suggestive of related theses about political action. For if political legitimacy requires the possibility of endorsement based on one's *understanding* (and not merely on one's knowledge), then plausibly we should also expect that political action within a liberal framework should be similarly constrained—e.g., autonomous voting of the sort that aspires to lend legitimacy to political policies and principles should, for the liberal, likewise be based on understanding and not *merely* on trusting someone's say-so, with no appreciation of one's own reasons and how they support what one is through one's vote endorsing.

§3

The idea that politically legitimate action—viz., action sourced in belief(s) that meet the epistemic component of the endorsement condition on political legitimacy—requires political *understanding* and not mere political knowledge offers us a useful starting point to address some vexed questions about political *communication*. As

Quassim Cassam (2018) notes, a particularly troubling feature of recent political discourse is an apparent rise a kind of epistemic indifference in political speech—viz., a casual lack of concern for the *basis* of one’s political assertions and beliefs. Cassam notes many examples here, though one he takes as a focal point is UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s frequent claims prior to the UK Brexit vote that leaving the EU will bring with it an array of economic benefits. It is unclear whether this is a lie, given that lying plausibly requires believing that what one says is false and so intending to deceive (see, e.g., Lackey, 2013), and we can’t be sure what Johnson actually believed. Nonetheless, Johnson’s demonstrable casual lack of concern—during the lead up to the Brexit vote—for the *basis* of his bold economic assertions (e.g., including his assertion about saving money from the NHS) and how they could serve to cogently support his position demonstrated indifference that, if not issuing in outright lies, issued in the kind of speech act Harry Frankfurt (2009) terms ‘bullshit’: speech without concern (positive or negative) for the truth.

Crucially for our present purpose, epistemic indifference to one’s political speech manifests not *only* in lies and bullshit, but also in political speech that is *not* misinformed, but nonetheless lacks concern for the capacity to discursively justify one’s assertions, and, correspondingly, for whether the hearer understands the issues in question or would be in a position to do so.

Consider here, for example, the press communications conveyed by former US President Donald Trump’s former press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders. Setting aside the information from Sanders that was inaccurate, Sanders was often challenged by the White House press corps for disregarding follow-ups from the media inviting her to explain and contextualise critical policy information she was instructed to relay, even when this policy information was accurate. Some of this accurate information conveyed in the White House briefing room, we may presume, Sanders *knew* to be true—and indeed presented perfectly accurately to the press in a way that manifested that knowledge—and yet her political communication here was often nonetheless taken to fall short, and for reasons that (at least on political liberalism) would seem to be politically relevant.

Drawing from the idea in §1 that politically legitimate action requires political *understanding* and not mere political knowledge, this paper will attempt to make headway in addressing exactly *why it is* that even knowledgeable *political assertions* –i.e., knowledgeable assertions of claims with political content (e.g., which political principles are correct, which policies should be prohibited/permitted by the principles we accept, etc.)² can be epistemically defective, and in doing so, I’ll connect the ideas we began with—about understanding as an epistemic constraint on political action—with the closely related idea that understanding is a plausible epistemic constraint on political assertion.

² These are examples of paradigmatic political assertions. It might be that the matter of whether some assertions are political is vague; after all, whether certain claims are political in character (and so would be political assertions if asserted) seems itself to be open to borderline cases. However, it is worth noting that conceding vagueness about political assertion as a type of speech isn’t itself in tension with the idea that political assertions can have an etiological function. By way of comparison, it might be that certain biological categories have vague boundaries while the members of categories continue to have the functions they do. To use a simple example: the function of the heart will be to pump blood even if it turns out that we discover that hearts admit of borderline cases at the margins.

§3

If politically legitimate action requires political *understanding* and not mere political knowledge, does this tell us anything about political *beliefs*? It surely does. Here it will be helpful to briefly consider an analogy to the literature on moral deference. On a view that has gained traction over the past decade, morally worthy action must be guided not by *mere* moral knowledge, but by moral understanding. As Hills (2010: p. 188) puts it, “doing the right thing on the basis of moral knowledge (even on the basis of knowledge why an action is right) is not sufficient for the action to have moral worth.” However, notice that if *this* is right, then if we form our moral beliefs on sheer deference (even if to a reliable authority), these beliefs will be importantly disconnected from the kinds of *actions* we would presumably hope to be guided by those very beliefs. That is, such beliefs would be capable of grounding, at most, actions that lack moral worth. This point—as critics of moral deference maintain—should lead us to aspire to ‘upgrade’ the quality of our epistemic standing with regard to moral matters to the level that would be needed to support morally worthy action—viz., to understanding. We should not, then, form moral beliefs based on mere deference.

By parity of reasoning, we can see a very similar line of argument unfolding in the political case of interest to us presently: if we form our political beliefs on sheer deference (even if to a reliable political authority), these beliefs will be importantly disconnected from legitimate political *actions*, which we would want to be guided by those very beliefs. That is—and continuing our analogy—such beliefs would be capable of generating, at most, actions (e.g., including endorsement of political principles, including endorsement via voting) that lack political worth, in the sense that they will, on the political liberal’s wider rationale, lack political *legitimacy*. This point, as the thought goes, should lead us to aspire to ‘upgrade’ the quality of our epistemic standing towards political matters to the level that would be needed to support politically legitimate action—viz., to political *understanding*. Political beliefs formed simply on mere testimonial say-so are in this respect defective.

§4

Let’s bracket for the moment the above point—that *political beliefs* are defective (in the epistemic sense relevant to the political liberal conception of legitimacy) if held on sheer deference—and consider the propriety of political *assertions*. The relevant question here is: if we suppose that political beliefs are defective if the topic is *merely* known but not understood, does anything follow from this about the epistemic constraints we should expect to be in place on one who *asserts* politically relevant information to a would-be believer?

Here it will be helpful to begin with a simple and broadly Gricean (1989) idea about assertion, which is that it is a speech act that has a function in communication, relative to which we can make sense of when an assertion is defective or not—viz., whether it fulfils its communicative function.

So what *is* the function of assertion within the social practice of communication?

Here is a plausible idea: The function of assertion is plausibly, at the very least, to generate *not mere belief but good*³ *belief* in the hearer. When assertion generates *good* beliefs in the hearer, it would seem that communication is working as it should. A familiar idea, associated with knowledge-first epistemology, identifies beliefs that are good *as beliefs* with knowledge (Williamson, 2002, 2016, 2017).⁴ Unsurprisingly, then, a number of researchers have endorsed the idea that the function of assertion is to generate good beliefs and therefore to generate *knowledge* in the hearer (Goldberg 2015, Kelp, 2018; Simion, 2019; Kelp and Simion 2021).

At this stage, the reader might already sense a tension between this kind of position and the very specific case of political beliefs we've been discussing so far. After all, regardless of what we say about beliefs more generally, we already have reason to think that *political beliefs* are defective in the epistemic sense relevant to the political liberal conception of legitimacy when known, but held on mere deference. We have seen that a popular explanation of this intuition is that political matters require a stronger epistemic standing, i.e. understanding. If that is right, it would seem as though we have a tension between the idea that the function of assertion is to generate knowledge, and the particular case of beliefs about political matters. More precisely, the following claims that we have found plausible seem to generate a puzzle for political deference: (1) the function of assertion is to generate good beliefs in hearers, (2) good beliefs are knowledgeable beliefs (3) political assertion has the disposition to generate knowledge in the hearer,⁵ (4) political beliefs held on mere deference are epistemically defective, even when knowledgeable. One of these claims has to go.

§5

In what follows, I argue that the culprit is a biconditional reading of (2): once we abandon the sufficiency direction, I claim, the puzzle disappears.

To see this, note that political belief is a species of belief. In turn, species inherit the normativity of the type: if a norm N governs the type, it governs each of its species S too, on pain of S not being a species of the type to begin with (Simion, 2019). If so, and if knowledge-firsters are right about good belief being knowledgeable belief, it

³ I use 'good' here in an attributive sense, i.e. good qua belief (Geach 1956).

⁴ The idea that beliefs are good, qua beliefs, is embraced widely by a range of well-known arguments for knowledge-first epistemology (see, e.g., Simion et al., 2016). For a summary of some of these arguments, and in particular, arguments for the knowledge norm of belief, see Benton (2014). It is worth noting, though, that the attractiveness of the idea that a belief is good (in the way of belief) iff known does not *depend* on antecedently accepting all or even most theses associated with knowledge-first epistemology. For example, the idea is implicit in Craig's (1990) reflections on the importance of having a concept that picks out beliefs that meet conditions for knowledge; likewise, virtue epistemologists (e.g., Sosa 2015) justify the idea that a belief as such is good only if known by reference to the kind of performance belief is, a kind of performance whose aim is attained aptly iff known.

⁵ Note that this is not to say that political assertions might not also be such that, all things considered, they ought to do other things beyond what it is that they are disposed to do given the kind of thing they are. For example, following a national tragedy, a leader's political assertions plausibly ought, all things considered, to aid in comforting the audience in a way sensitive to lifting spirits and morale. These however are considerations that go beyond what a given political assertion ought to do *qua* political assertion from speaker to hearer (e.g., generate a certain kind of epistemic standing in the hearer).

will follow that all species thereof will inherit this knowledge evaluative norm: beliefs ought to be knowledgeable.⁶ That being, said, though, note that species only inherit the necessity direction of type norms: indeed, in virtue of being *particular* species of the type in question, species are governed by *particular* norms that they do not inherit from the type. One way this can happen is by being governed by extra norms, *on top* of the ones governing the type. Alternatively, species can be governed by *stronger* versions of the norms governing the type. If so, what we are left with is a minimal threshold for good belief when it comes to particular species thereof: beliefs are good beliefs qua beliefs only if knowledgeable. Compatibly, particular species of belief may be governed by stronger norms, and/or further norms, on top of the knowledge norm. (2) is only correct when read as a necessity claim. If so, the puzzle disappears: some varieties of belief may require more than knowledge in order to be well held. This, I claim, is the case of political beliefs.

If so, the claim that the function of assertion is to generate knowledge in the hearer is only correct when read as a minimal claim as well: the function of assertion is, minimally, to generate knowledgeable beliefs. Compatibly, some varieties of assertion may serve a more sophisticated epistemic function, corresponding to the normativity governing the variety of beliefs they aim to generate. Because politically legitimate action must be based on political understanding and not merely on political knowledge, beliefs about political facts based on mere deference are defective, even if knowledgeable. Understanding implies a grasp of how one's reasons support the positions one sets out to autonomously endorse. Only such understanding (and not knowledge alone) equips one to act with political legitimacy. Accordingly, then, *political assertion has the function to generate understanding, not mere knowledge*. In this respect, political assertion is plausibly more akin to *moral* assertion than it is to other more standard kinds of assertion which generate good beliefs in hearers *whenever* the hearer gains knowledge.

§6

Consider the following case:

MNEMONIC SAM: Sam, the President's press secretary, is about to give an important press briefing on a live threat of a very specific kind of cyberattack, which if not contained soon by ongoing efforts could compromise the electrical grid on the entire eastern seaboard. The media have heard rumours, and await anxiously for the press briefing to better gauge the nature of the threat. Sam's intellectual weak spot, unfortunately, is cybersecurity. In fact, this is such a weak spot that Sam barely understands any of the information he has been given from the President's communications director, passed on from intelligence briefings. In a panic, Sam uses a very elaborate mnemonic device to memorize the three-page briefing to the press corps on cybersecurity. Equipped with no understanding whatsoever about cybersecurity but a wealth of memorised documents,

⁶ See McHugh (2012: 22) for an application of the distinction between evaluative and prescriptive normativity to the truth norm of belief.

Sam briefs the press on the ongoing threat. The press are impressed and gain on the basis of the briefing a clear appreciation of how the cyberthreat has the capacity to compromise the electrical grid. Exhausted and prepared to move on to other topics, they (rather unusually) ask no follow-up questions on the cyberattack.

Here are two observations: Sam does *not* understand the cybersecurity threat; he doesn't understand it any more than an actor reading from a card. Secondly, the press corps now *do* understand this threat, and they do so on the basis of his assertions in the briefing and follow-ups to their questions.

But when we put these two observations together, doesn't the view developed so far face a tension? Let me spell out the tension. The I have argued for is that political assertion has the function to generate understanding. The political assertions Sam makes in the above press briefing *do exactly that*. And yet—and here's the tension—it seems as though Sam's assertions to the media are still *in some way* defective, despite fulfilling their function. But how can this be?

§7

The answer here comes from putting together a further observation about MNEMONIC SAM, with some ideas developed in the philosophy of functions, more specifically, in the literature on etiological theories of function (e.g., Millikan, 1984). The observation is that although reading from a card (or memorising information one doesn't understand at all) is a *possible way* to generate understanding in a hearer, it is not at all *the normal way* to do so. After all, it is just down to dumb luck that the press corps didn't grill Sam with difficult questions, his answers to which (or lack thereof) would have then contributed to confusion.

The *normal way* to fulfil the function of generating political understanding in the hearer is by one's assertions *being sourced in political understanding*. Normally, asserters understand what they're talking about, which leads them to explain things well enough to generate understanding in their hearers.⁷ If Sam actually understood the cyberattack threat, he would then be in a position to not only convey accurate information (and in a coherent narrative, memorised or not), but also, importantly, to engage in discussion to the extent that the hearers required clarifications and further

⁷ One point here that bears emphasis is the following: the claim that the *normal* route to function fulfilment (of generating political understanding in the hearer) is one by which assertions are sourced in understanding (on the speaker's side) is entirely compatible with observations that have been made variously in the literature and which demonstrate the falsity of epistemic transmission principles of the form: a hearer can acquire a belief with epistemic property P via testimony from a speaker only if the speaker's belief has P. While the classic example in the literature is Lackey's (2007) case of the creationist teacher, which purports to show that hearers can gain knowledge from speakers only if the speaker has the relevant knowledge, an analogous point, as Malfatti (2019) holds (see also Gordon (2016)) in the case of understanding. That is: just as hearers can know via testimony from speakers who lack the relevant knowledge, so likewise can hearers gain understanding from speakers who lack it. Crucially, countenancing this point is compatible with the view maintained here, which is that the normal route by which one generates understanding in a hearer will be one whereby the speaker possesses the relevant understanding. Thanks to a reviewer for suggesting clarification on this point.

explanations. And he would be reliably able to do this, equipped with the kinds of intellectual sophistication that understanding (rather than mere disconnected knowledge) demands.

The fact that *the normal* way to achieve function of generating understanding in the hearer is by *being sourced in understanding* on the part of the speaker is a consideration with an important theoretical ramification in the theory of etiological functions. In short, this because central to the etiological theory of functions is that functions *generate norms*. For example, if the function of some trait or practice A is X, then A is properly functioning—i.e., functioning as it should—when it is normally functioning. In turn, normal functioning is unpacked as the way in which A worked back at the point of function acquisition since, in normal conditions—i.e. the conditions of function acquisition—that is a reliable way towards function fulfilment. Take the function of the heart, which is to pump blood. The heart *could* fulfil its function by luck—say, by moving randomly in a way that just so happens to pump blood. While it is doing this, it is fulfilling its function, but it violates a norm that is generated by its function—viz., the norm that it proceed in the way in which it did back when it acquired its function of pumping blood. The heart is malfunctioning: in normal conditions—conditions of function acquisition—it will not reliably fulfil its function by moving randomly into the chest.

What goes for the heart goes for Sam. Sam's assertion fulfils its function by luck, since Sam himself has no understanding of the subject matter. In normal conditions, this is not a reliable way of function fulfilment. What is plausible is that the practice of political assertion generated understanding at the moment of function acquisition via being sourced in understanding rather than luck. In normal conditions, assertions based on understanding will continue to do so reliably.

The norm for political assertion, then, sourced in its etiological function of generating political understanding, is that it be sourced in understanding on the speaker's side. We now have an explanation for why Sam's briefing in MNEMONIC SAM is defective *despite* generating understanding in the hearer. It is because Sam lacked political understanding, and thus was in breach of *the norm* of political assertion.

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With the central argument now in view, it will be useful to consider and respond to a potential objection about the proposal's wider implications. More specifically, it might seem, initially, as though an inevitable implication is one of widespread norm violation. The worry is as follows: the sheer volume of political misinformation and distrust of expertise is suggestive of a lack of political understanding behind a significant subset of all political assertions. The idea that understanding (a broadly factive phenomenon⁸)

⁸ This is to say that, what is grasped – viz., the information one grasps the connections between when one understands – must be accurate. There is notable dispute about how to characterise this demand; for instance, as Kvanvig (2003) and others have noted, the demand is implausible if no error is tolerated. However, at least in the epistemology of understanding (see e.g., Carter and Gordon (2016)), the view that understanding requires at least some kind of factivity condition is largely accepted. Though, cf., Elgin (2017), for some resistance to this idea.

is the norm of political assertion, accordingly, would then seem to predict that large portion of political assertions actually made are defective, given that we can anticipate many such assertions will be grounded in (various kinds of) political misinformation and epistemically unreasonable distrust.

This kind of objection, however, invites two different kinds of responses. Firstly, and importantly, it should be emphasised that nearly all researchers in the epistemology of understanding take understanding to come in degrees.⁹ With this in mind, the relevant question becomes: is the level of understanding required for outright understanding set so high that a result would be that political understanding is exceedingly rare, *in light of* data we have about the prevalence of misinformation, etc.? It's not clear that it would be. To give just one example, consider a simple case where a political candidate asserts that a certain tax aimed to support an environmental policy will help the environment. Even if we grant that there is misinformation floating around in the wider ecosystem (e.g., conspiracy theory websites that hold that all taxation dollars are pocketed by a secret oligarchy), it is nonetheless plausible to suppose that both a speaker *and* hearer can grasp (in a way required for outright understanding) that such a policy will help the environment, so long as they're not *actually* taken in by the conspiracy theories, and *even if* both speaker and hearer lack a sophisticated grasp on taxation policy and economics such that they could account for how all tax funds would be spent precisely, and how (e.g., in terms of biological processes) trees planted and funded by the tax funds would release oxygen into the atmosphere in such a way as to help the environment. The above response to the anticipated objection, accordingly, calls into doubt whether we should expect norm violations (predicated on an understanding norm on political assertion) to be *more widespread* than we should expect them to be.¹⁰

However, there is perhaps a more forceful line of response to the above worry, which allows us to simply grant to the critic that if understanding is a norm on political assertion, then norm violations would be widespread. This second reply is metatheoretical: the fact that a theory of X (de facto) implicates widespread X-norm violations isn't in itself a decisive—or even good—reason to think the theory is mistaken. To use just one example: many of our most successful theories of rational belief revision make use of norms governing ideal rational updating moves that are rarely met in practice. The fact that we often make rational mistakes isn't a good indication that, e.g., Bayesian updating rules don't correctly model ideally rational ways to update in light of new evidence. But—and this is a related metatheoretical point—the fact that a given theory of the norm governing X predicts widespread norm violations implicates the theory should be rejected if we have independent grounds to think that individuals are following correct norms when participating in the kind of activity that norm X purports to

⁹ For discussion, see, e.g., Kvanvig (2003), Pritchard (2009) and Gordon (2017).

¹⁰ Note that a similar point holds in response to a variation on the objection that targets the implication the proposal's starting assumptions have *vis-à-vis* the scope of political legitimacy itself. That is to say: even if the political liberal's commitment to autonomous reflective endorsement (as a component of political legitimacy) requires some understanding on the part of those doing the endorsing, we needn't interpret the level of understanding so required as of any high degree. The insight that understanding admits of degrees suggests then that the epistemic claim the political liberal is initially committed to needn't have the kinds of implications that would follow from, e.g., an implausibly restrictive interpretation of the position on which autonomous reflective endorsement requires a *high degree* of understanding.

govern. However, in the case of political assertion, though, we already have ample evidence that in fact norm violations are reasonably common, even if not the norm. (This point, in fact, gained international attention following Trump spokesperson Kellyanne Conway's baffling assertions about crowd size following the inauguration of Donald Trump) (see, e.g., Barrera et al., 2020).

Thus, and in sum, the worry that an understanding norm on political assertion is going to generate implausibly strong implications, when it comes to norm violations, is not one that ultimately poses any kind of intractable problem for the view. This is because (i) with a suitable appreciation of the gradability of understanding, it's plausible that understanding-backed assertion will be commonplace even granting assumptions about the prevalence of misinformation in the infosphere; and because (ii) *even if* the view generated the result that there is widespread norm violations within the activity type of political assertion, this in itself needn't be a problem for the theory.

§9

In summary, here is where we've got: (a) Politically legitimate action—at least, within a framework of political liberalism—requires autonomy, and thus political *understanding* and not mere political knowledge; (b) as such, political belief based on mere deference is defective in an important sense: it cannot generate politically legitimate action; (c) assertion has the function to generate good belief; (d) political assertion has the function to generate understanding, not mere knowledge; (e) The most reliable way to achieve function fulfilment, in normal conditions, in the case of political assertion, is by it being sourced in understanding; (f) functions generate norms: proceed in the way that's most reliable towards function fulfilment in normal conditions; (g) therefore, understanding is the norm of political assertion.

The above line of argument offers us a helpful vantage point to revisit cases of political apathy, even when it issues in accurate, and even knowledgeable, information communicated to a voting public. On the presumption that what we *need* for politically legitimate and worthy action is not mere political beliefs and knowledge but political understanding, the *norm* to which we should hold purveyors of political discourse—particularly those in a position of political responsibility—is the norm of *political understanding*. When political speech is inaccurate—as we find in the epidemic of fake news—it violates this norm. But importantly for what I hope to have established here, even when accurate and sourced in knowledge, political discourse can still be normatively defective, even when the hearer *happens* to gain political understanding on its basis. Whenever political speech is based on less than political understanding, such speech should be held—at least in liberal democracies—to a higher standard.

Declarations

Conflict of interest No conflicts of interest to disclose.

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