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Beyond Rationality: Reconciling Non-Ideal Agency and Epistemology in the Community

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Senior Honors Project

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the graduation requirements
of the Westover Honors College**

Westover Honors College

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Table of Contents

Part I: Introduction	2
Part II: Background: The State of Epistemology, Agency, and Political Theory	4
Part III: A Community Based Epistemology	133
Part IV: Complicating Theoretical Factors for Epistemic Rationality.....	20
Part V: Dangers of the Contemporary Epistemic Community	29
Part VI: Beyond Rationality: Capturing Epistemic Virtue	33
Part VII: Epistemic Virtue and Rationality in Political Theory.....	36
Part VIII: Conclusion: Augmenting Epistemic Considerations in Political Philosophy	49
Appendix A.....	51
Appendix B	52
References.....	53

Part I: Introduction

Belief concerns what a person thinks to be true or false. All agents hold beliefs, which are informed by their past experiences, the information they consume, and other less tangible influences. Many beliefs prove inconsequential. Circumstantial beliefs about who will win a football game or whether it will rain affect the agent who holds those beliefs, but these beliefs rarely empower the agent to act on them in a way that impacts society. At face value, internal beliefs only matter to the agent that possesses them. However, belief is intimately connected to action. A person's acceptance or skepticism of the world around her shapes most aspects of her actions in society, as the food she buys, the politicians she votes for, and the laws she breaks are all influenced by her beliefs in some way. Because of this relationship between belief and action, the beliefs of people within society fundamentally influence the effectiveness of political systems. Without an understanding of how people generally act and what they believe, it is difficult to form a responsive, stable, and just political structure. This requires a keen awareness of where individuals within society come together or diverge in their beliefs.

Disagreement between people is a natural and common phenomenon. However, a September 2019 Pew Research Center study found that 73 percent of the American adults they surveyed believed, "on important issues facing the country, most Democratic voters and Republican voters ... not only disagree over plans and policies, but also cannot agree on basic facts." Polarization and disagreement infiltrate broader opinions as well as basic truths. Within political society, this disconnect threatens people's ability to cooperate and coexist in the community. Party affiliation presents a natural boundary to differentiate what groups will hold opposing beliefs; one could reasonably assume that a Democrat believes tax increases on the rich are justified while a Republican would argue against these tax hikes. However, it is unclear

whether these evenly split issues develop from the precise convictions of individuals within those parties or instead through the pressure to conform and believe in the party and its messaging.

Division and controversy develop within and without politics. Some issues are almost apolitical, as they go beyond political issues that candidates address in their platforms. While issues like vaccine hesitancy and acknowledgement of climate change can divide people along party lines, people also hold more obscure beliefs like round earth denial and the belief that the Sun revolves around the Earth. These issues, at the basic level, deal with an individual person's beliefs. These issues also serve as paradigm cases for how beliefs spread. In the age of social media, all people regardless of credentials can project their beliefs. The reasoning behind belief, which is often used to encourage others to hold similar beliefs, inspires systemic, impactful action inspired by these beliefs, whether or not the reasoning is grounded in truth. As a result, the loudest, best sounding idea may win support. This reality endangers an agent's ability to produce rational, truth-grounded beliefs. By extension, society as a whole stands at the mercy of its most accessible or beloved sources. Celebrities with millions of followers can sound off on issues with a bigger megaphone than scientists with expertise on those issues. Today's divisive issues are born from non-ideal circumstances: people consume information without verifying its merit and use that information to form their beliefs and inform their actions. This contemporary truth calls into question whether today's agents are truly rational.

In order to determine whether people are irrational, it is helpful to understand how people come to believe certain ideas and feel confident in those beliefs. While modern and recent political theory often uses a state of nature framework, the nuance and complexity of an agent's innate rationality is rarely the central focus of these inquiries. To borrow from the desire to

understand complex ideas through analyzing their first or simplest occurrences, understanding the mechanisms and systems that contribute to imperfect or seemingly unreasonable actions in society can illustrate the true nature of agents. Because rational agency is a prerequisite for full participation in most political theory, rationality is a core consideration for the effectiveness of these ideal societies. The disconnect between certain epistemic issues in today's society and the ideal world that unfolds in political theory illustrate that non-ideal agency is an important component of effective ideal theory.

This thesis posits epistemic rationality as a solution to political ills, both in theory and in practice. By focusing on what contributes to a belief prior to an agent's actions, I seek to understand the structure of rational belief to accommodate and neutralize the negative impact of imperfect agency in the community. I find that epistemic agents are rational but epistemically flawed. I argue that affording greater consideration to epistemic rationality and epistemic virtue within political theory creates a responsive structure to how agents *ought* to be within society in light of how they are. I conclude that agents lean on others when forming beliefs and society must acknowledge and harness the potential of the epistemic community to curb epistemic weakness. I advocate for sociopolitical structures that encourage epistemically good reasoning, beginning with their inclusion in political theory, which would inform new epistemically conscious political systems and reform of the current epistemic community.

Part II: Background: The State of Epistemology, Agency, and Political Theory

Epistemology and socio-political philosophy are distinct disciplines that often overlap. Epistemology¹ deals with knowledge and justification, while political philosophy deals with questions of political life and how to structure just political institutions. Epistemology is a broad

¹ See Appendix A for a table of definitions.

discipline that encompasses a variety of ideas and questions relating to knowledge and understanding. Two of these concepts, belief and justification, underpin the way an agent acts towards others and within political institutions (Steup and Neta, 2020). Epistemology as a discipline deals with knowledge, but the definition of knowledge itself is largely debated. As a result, it is impractical to center knowledge as a practical goal in this inquiry. Instead, the aim of this thesis is to encourage truth-grounded belief, which informs an agent's actions in the community. The relationship between the individual and community, famously interrogated through Plato's city/soul analogy in the *Republic*, highlights broader questions of justice, stability, and individual agency.

Plato's Allegory of the Cave and the Divided Line² reconcile the structure of knowledge with the agent's role in knowledge-aimed belief formation. The Allegory of the Cave illustrates the separation between people, belief, and knowledge:

'... See human beings as though they were in an underground cave-like dwelling with its entrance, a long one, open to the light across the whole width of the cave. They are in it from childhood with their legs and necks in bonds so that they are fixed, seeing only in front of them, unable because of the bond to turn their heads all the way around. Their light is from a fire burning far above and behind them. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a road above, along which see a wall, built like the partitions puppet-handlers set in front of the human beings and over which they show the puppets...' (*The Republic* 514a-b).

Those who escape the cave and see the outside world do not initially accept its truth, as it goes against everything they know:

'Now consider ... what their release and healing from bonds and folly would be like something of this sort were by nature to happen to them. Take a man who is released and suddenly compelled to stand up, to turn his neck around, to walk and look up toward the light; and who, moreover, in doing all this is in pain and, because he is dazzled, is unable to make out those things whose shadows he saw before. What do you suppose he'd say if someone were to tell him that before he saw silly nothings, while now, because he is somewhat nearer to what *is* and more turned toward beings, he sees more correctly; and, in particular, showing him each of the things that pass by, were to compel the man to

² See Appendix B for a diagram of the Divided Line.

answer his questions about what they are? Don't you suppose he'd be at a loss and believe that what was seen before is truer than what is now being shown?' (*The Republic* 515c-d).

After the man who escapes the cave comes to terms with the world around him, first "annoyed at being so dragged" but finally "happy for the change," he has little evidence beyond his own reasoning and experiences to help his fellow prisoners out of the cave (*The Republic* 516a-516c). Those in the cave have little reason to believe anything exists outside the cave, and they even have reason *not to believe* people who return from outside the cave. The Allegory of the Cave suggests that rationality, truth, and knowledge are not necessarily connected. The prisoners in the cave, having lived there their whole lives, are not *irrational* for believing the reflections on the cave wall are reality. Their limited evidence supports their beliefs. The Cave suggests that the solution to ignorance comes from evidence, but it is implausible (even irrational) for prisoners in The Cave to accept evidence from a single source that defies their structure of understanding.

Knowledge and truth-grounded beliefs are against the nature of agents, or else, social structures have a great influence on people's beliefs. The Cave illustrates the nuance of belief in society. The Divided Line, as the escaped prisoner explores the levels of belief and knowledge, emphasizes the importance of reasoning or evidence to inform belief. Although an allegory, The Cave emphasizes the relevance of structure or environment to belief formation. If the cave wall portrayed images more closely related to the abstract Forms, people within the cave would technically hold true beliefs about the world.³ The Allegory of the Cave deals chiefly with knowledge, but it suggests that truth-directed structures produce epistemically better beliefs.

³ For example, if those in The Cave see the reflection of a projected sun that carries the general shape of the real sun, they would have true beliefs about the shape of the sun. Their source material is, of course, mistaken, but their belief is true.

Rational people are at the mercy of their environment, and epistemically informed structures create more accurate beliefs. If the cave is carved or run by a person with knowledge aimed at knowledge, those within the cave are directed towards true beliefs. In society, these puppeteers are generally politicians. However, the accessibility of the internet suggests that puppeting is less centrally controlled in a globalized system. The puppeteers in this system are those who run social media sites and create algorithms, not government officials. This, of course, presents a danger to structuring a stable political order if the government is not the only puppeteer. Conversely, this check on monopolized epistemic power could save citizens from oppressive systems, as today's agents may encounter censorship in State media but can encounter new sources of information if they gain access to social media.

Beyond The Cave, in society, political systems clearly hold a similar power to the puppet masters in The Cave. The political systems and social conventions into which an agent is born color her understanding of reality. In the age of social media, this once widespread acceptance of belief suffers from intense fractures. Today's cave wall is a Facebook Wall. Each person stands at the mercy of the segment the algorithm places them in front of. Language, conversation, and reasoning all follow from a person's experiences, but they also add additional layers to *why* people believe what they do. The prisoner who comes back into the cave provides hope for another prisoner to escape the cave.⁴ The prisoners' only real paths towards knowledge, if their shackles do not coincidentally break, come from other people. Plato suggests that knowledge faces an uphill battle to compete with enduring social conventions. Obviously, taking every prisoner out of the cave would force people closer to knowledge. Doing so, however, deprives the prisoners of any society and is impossible. Bridging the gap between knowledge and opinion

⁴ While I refer to The Cave throughout this thesis, I do so only to reference the *pursuit of knowledge*, which often ends with truth-grounded belief or opinion. Obtaining knowledge is beyond the scope of this thesis.

in a practical way requires creating a more truth-directed cave, not universally abandoning the only structure these prisoners know. Importantly, Plato does not advocate for the truth-directed cave. The relevance of epistemic considerations in contemporary society suggests that reevaluating the Ancients from a contemporary lens and centrally situating concepts of epistemic virtue within current society can help resolve political polarization and division on otherwise fact-based and scientifically-backed issues like climate change. This digression from Plato mirrors the aim of this project, truth-grounded opinion, not inaccessible knowledge.

Although belief and knowledge suffer from degrees of separation on the systemic level, as shown in the Divided Line, individual belief and knowledge present few differences when channeled into action. The intricate nature of knowledge is captured in Plato's *Meno*, where Meno and Socrates investigate the difference between right opinion and knowledge. Socrates presents the example of the road to Larissa, where two travelers trek to Larissa separately, one knowing the path to Larissa and the other simply possessing the right opinion about the way having never been there. Because both travelers reach their destination, Socrates grants that they lead to seemingly indistinguishable results, achieving the aim of their beliefs. Each traveler, if she reaches her destination, is an equally good guide for the particular situation, as they both reach their destinations. In reconciling the tangible difference between the two, as knowledge must be better in *some* way, Socrates introduces the relevance of beliefs in relation to one another:

For true opinions, as long as they remain, are a fine thing and all they do is good, but they are not willing to remain long, and they escape from a man's mind, so that they are not worth much until one ties them down by (giving) as an account of the reason why. And that, Meno, my friend, is recollection, as we previously agreed. After they are tied down, in the first place they become knowledge is prized higher than correct opinion, and knowledge differs from correct opinion in being tied down (*Meno* 97e-98a).

If the bounds of judgment for a belief rely on a single exercise of that belief, right opinion and knowledge may produce identical outcomes, as with the Larissa example. Analyzing the agent through their actions provides incomplete results. *Meno* emphasizes the consequences of belief, in individual instances and over time. *Meno*'s resolution advocates for the relevance of evidential support and the danger of judging actions at face-value.

Just as *Meno* and the Larissa example explain the nuance of an action in relation to the belief and justification that supports the belief that produces the action, agency deals with the ability for agents to act in the way they aim. Both the one with right opinion and the one with knowledge act as agents, and their ability to reach their destination suggests that they possess an ability to act and *achieve* the aims of their actions. However, rational agency poses the additional constraint that agents should act in the way their premises support. Then, she who lacks the support for her belief of the direction of Larissa is unsupported, and, in light of her rational agency, should not have felt supported to trek towards Larissa based on her evidence. Obviously, certain situations in which agents lack evidence altogether, presumably the individual with the right opinion, would not prohibit her from trekking towards Larissa. Instead, that individual's epistemic capabilities would simply lead her to lack confidence in her ability to accurately reach Larissa. In any case, epistemic rationality transforms agency from a measure of whether an agent can act to whether an agent can act *in a supported or reasonable way*.

The relationship between supported belief and action in relation to judgments of rationality produces two main branches of rationality: practical rationality (PR) (concerned with action) and theoretical rationality (concerned with thought). Epistemic rationality (ER) is a version of theoretical rationality, which reframes thought-based rationality with an allegiance to belief and knowledge. The distinction between PR and ER is a central consideration for much

epistemic inquiry, and many theorists explore these concepts both alone and in relation to each other. Speech possesses immense power. In the United States, the distinction between speech and action is an important constitutional question.⁵ Social media augments speech, creating greater access and reach for others to react or agree with one another. If speech is not action, it is an important expression of thought. Epistemic rationality captures this relevance, pinpointing the gap that explicit action leaves behind in regards to political life. People who express their beliefs on Facebook do not commit an overt action beyond speech. An action that breaks a law certainly invites consequences, but speech that incites action (however distant or direct) holds its own power. Analyzing action and social danger through the lens of epistemic rationality helps understand the deeper nuances of agency and rationality that law may not cover.

However, the precise definition of epistemic rationality is largely ambiguous. As epistemology deals with knowledge, ER reconciles epistemic consideration with an agent's rationality. Epistemic rationality, then, is that which deals with the epistemic aspects of an agent's rational faculties. Thomas Kelly (2003) defines epistemic rationality as:

the kind of rationality which one displays when one believes propositions that are strongly supported by one's evidence and refrains from believing propositions that are improbable given one's evidence (612).

Kelly's definition aims at a sense of uniformity and support, finding that agents align with practicality or probability in their beliefs. However, while Kelly's definition presents a strong logical structure to ground ER, it is quite insulated. To Kelly, an agent is epistemically rational if her beliefs are supported, and she is unsupported if she neglects the practical considerations of her belief. The tension between probability and belief places an agent in the context of the world around her, or else, the world as she sees it. Presumably, for Kelly, that which is probable for the

⁵ See *Brandenburg v. Ohio* (1969) and *Gitlow v. New York* (1925).

epistemically rational agents is simply a matter of her perspective and experiences. If Kelly's agent follows the clues of her experiences correctly, making logical inferences in light of her evidence, she is epistemically rational. While it may be uncharitable to demand something of agents beyond their experiences, epistemic rationality is an exercise of an agent's capabilities, not the beliefs themselves. In light of this, it seems that agents who exercise their epistemic rationality ought to sense their beliefs in reference to a higher standard beyond their existing beliefs, an additional quality.

David Christensen (2021), in "The Ineliminability of Epistemic Rationality," presents an additional consideration for epistemic rationality: truth (501). Christensen argues that epistemically rational beliefs must be aimed at some truth, which presents a more precise understanding of ER than Kelly. While a charitable interpretation of Christensen and Kelly may find that they aim at the same target, a sense of coherent or cohesive reasoning surrounding a belief, they pose different thresholds for rationality. For Kelly, general coherent support is the goal, whereas truth is the threshold for Christensen. Both definitions frame similar concepts in different ways. Truth lives in the subtext for Kelly, as logically valid arguments may not ensure the truth of their premises, but the ultimate goal of logical argumentation, soundness, would ensure that an agent's belief is both structurally valid and factually correct. As a result, if we interpret Kelly's definition to aim at soundness, that an agent's belief and reasoning follows *and* maps to the world around her, truth is entirely relevant. In marrying these two definitions, a hybrid view of Christensen and Kelly can define ER as:

the kind of rationality which one displays when one believes propositions that are strongly supported by one's evidence and refrains from believing propositions that are improbable given one's evidence, *ultimately aimed at some truth.*

Before a rational agent acts, she forms beliefs about the world around her, with reasons or premises that point her toward holding a certain belief. This process is roughly what ER judges. While beliefs should follow from support for all rational actors, universal principles may not dictate belief formation in the same way.⁶ In light of this, belief and evidentiary support are the main consideration for ER.

The intricacy of an individual agent's rationality deepens when analyzing her role in the community. Understanding rational agency in the community relies on augmenting individual agency—theorizing about multiple individual agents in a community—and recognizing the aim of rational agency, its application in ethical and political theory. However, doing so from an epistemic lens presents difficulties. Just as epistemic rationality covers a broad spectrum of considerations, understanding an agent's all-things-considered rational capacity is nuanced and complicated.

Contemporary epistemology often deals with non-ideal agents and their line of reasoning. While a wide range of theorists seek to illustrate complicated cases for epistemic agents and work to reconcile whether or not these roadblocks are irrational or rational, this thesis endeavors to sketch the relevance of this debate as a consideration for restructuring the boundaries of agency in political theory. Similarly, political theory also trends towards non-ideal understandings of society. Ben Laurence (2020), in “The Question of The Agent of Change,” illustrates how the individual within non-ideal theory, the “agent of change,” is all the more important to achieving the aims of non-ideal theory, which, to Laurence, are to address the injustice of existing political life (360, 355). In this way, understanding individuals as they are is essential to overcoming the political system as it is. However, Lisa Herzog (2012), in “Ideal and

⁶ Similarly, other variables or aspects of belief like desire, while important to broader understandings of human action and agency and widely discussed since the Greeks, sit in the periphery of this discussion.

Non-Ideal Theory and The Problem of Knowledge,” suggests that the jump between non-ideal theory and ideal theory presents deeper problems in how an agent acts in the way they ought (276). Herzog discusses various problems regarding how agents are expected to access essential knowledge in non-ideal settings, which, to Herzog, makes non-ideal theory more difficult to accomplish. However, this consideration seems relevant to ideal theory as well.

While non-ideal and ideal theory have different aims, as one reacts directly to the world as it is presently and the other may do so if only to understand how it ought to be *all things considered*, an understanding of the agent *as she is* aligns with both aims. Ideal theory, if it aims to establish the best possible society, regardless of what this specifically entails (stability, justice, etc.), must do so in response to an understanding of how people *will act* in that society. As a result, Herzog’s warning is an essential component of effective political theory. As with The Cave, people will believe what they know, which includes belief in and dependence on the people around them. Political theory helps reconcile the role of the individual with the community’s pursuit of truth and knowledge. Epistemology is a necessary consideration for understanding agents; therefore, political theory must form its own epistemology that reacts to an agent’s epistemic nature in society. Today’s issues illustrate that people lean on each other online for epistemic validation. As a result, political theory would benefit from a community based epistemology to underpin its political understanding.

Part III: A Community Based Epistemology

What Is A Community Based Epistemology?

A community based epistemology centers the role of the community in the pursuit of truth-grounded belief. This structure endorses an agent’s use of other people to acquire additional information when forming a belief. Conversely, an individually dependent or individualistic

epistemology prohibits agents from using other people's information and ideas as evidence for their own ideas. In everyday life, this cannot keep an agent from talking to other agents. Instead, an individualistic epistemology draws a boundary between an individual's reasoning and their trust of the reasoning of others. This carries its own merit. An individually-based epistemology certainly judges an agent's rationality on their thought processes, which presents clear margins for evaluation. However, individually-centered inquiries ignore the externally-connected nature of rational agency. An individualistic epistemology leaves agents in the cave to find their own way out, while a community based epistemology encourages agents to look to each other for answers.

A community based epistemology encourages agents to lean on each other to form truth-grounded beliefs, but it muddies the boundaries of justification. Individual reasoning allows for clear evaluation, as the premises that lead to an agent's conclusion and beliefs can be traced directly back to the agent. However, this is not the reality of belief formation, or else, it amputates a large pool of information that agents draw from: each other. Individuals in a solitary state outside of society rely on themselves for reasoning. However, just as they would if they entered society, when they gain an internet connection and a cell phone, they expose themselves to an immense pool of additional information. The internet exacerbates an agent's ability to form beliefs with other people's evidence without evaluating the source's merit. If this evidence was just words on a page of a newspaper with a tiny by-line and no pictures, it would be less clear that an agent sees her interaction with the new information as a form of conversation with another person. In the social media age, each Tweet and Facebook post contains a profile picture and words directly from another person, untouched by editors. The once solitary person can comment and discuss with the person who wrote the Tweet, all without seeing another person

face-to-face. The platforms themselves encourage engagement, creating algorithms that boost posts that create interaction. As a result, the internet itself encourages a community based epistemology without any dependence on real life socio political structures. Presently, the internet does so in a way that encourages engagement, not necessarily truth.

Just as the solitary individual interacts with others thousands of miles away, an individual with everyday in-person interaction encounters the same forums. Water cooler conversations, meetings, and protests all center human interaction as a key to progress or information. Because people naturally gravitate towards this interaction, it follows that a large portion of their information and reasoning comes from their relationships to other people. While an individualistic epistemology presents a clear cut area of judgment, agents are epistemically related and should therefore be treated as such. Centering the community within epistemic pursuits allows agents to learn from others and hold each other accountable, *if they choose to do so* or the system encourages them to. Importantly, the same community that forms great beliefs together can also reinforce epistemically bad beliefs if the epistemic community engages in epistemically bad reasoning.

A community based epistemology brings its own temptations for agents to digress from informed reasoning, which complicates the pursuit of a principled understanding of epistemic rationality. However, making epistemic judgments community-based shifts the boundaries of what reasoning is acceptable or irrational. One may see this as moving the goal posts in an unjustified way; making the threshold of rationality mirror the current nature of people in society changes the value of measuring rationality. However, this is not to say that people are not rational. Instead, it may suggest that rationality as a whole is not an adequate enough measure of an agent's capabilities. If philosophers and society present rationality as a concept that

encompasses well-informed or *best* actions, they may be mistaken. This issue precisely illustrates why epistemic rationality needs to hold more weight in political theory and other forms of reflection. Epistemic rationality may itself be an inadequate measure of *all things considered* epistemic ability, but it opens the doors to the intricate epistemic nature of agents. It is important to establish the boundaries of epistemic rationality when using it to inform a large-scale epistemology because these lines highlight what issues are left behind after judgments of rationality. As the main problems exist in society as it stands, working to rationalize and analyze people as they are through an epistemic lens is a first step in establishing how far agents are from rationality and epistemic goodness, if at all. Because political and ethical theory often uses rationality as a measure of agency, understanding the rational value of agents is an important step in measuring where theory stands and where it must change.

Why Community Based?: Epistemic Dependence and External Justification

Looking for solutions to the weaknesses of agents requires understanding how agents form beliefs within society. People expose each other to new ideas and viewpoints. In the journey towards the best, most reasonable beliefs, human interaction enables agents to break out of their preconceptions about the structure of reality. However, an agent places immense weight in the level of trust she has in her sources. John Hardwig (1991) suggests that trust is often ignored but an important aspect of epistemology that emphasizes the relevance of other people to one's own belief formation. Hardwig points out how collaboration is common in empirical science because it is simply too difficult to collect a large amount of data alone (1985). Importantly, society accepts these scientific findings in spite of or even *because* multiple scientists worked together to reach a certain conclusion. Hardwig suggests that trust in the

reliability of one's testimony is a necessary component of contemporary knowledge acquisition or truth-grounded belief formation, as specialization is inescapable.

While an agent's trust informs her beliefs, she also naturally gravitates towards external sources. Like his understanding of trust, Hardwig's (1985) theory of epistemic dependence illustrates that an agent's role and experiences with others in society are influential to her trust in others and her belief formation process. Therefore, interpersonal relations are an important aspect of human reasoning and rationality. Hardwig's expert-layman distinction suggests that it is *more* rational in some cases for an agent to have good reasons for believing something *because* she has good reasons for believing that someone else has good reasons to believe it, especially if that person is epistemically superior or an expert on the subject (336). This clearly endorses the practical necessity, or the reality, of external dependence in at least some cases, but it does not erase a connection to facts or truth, as the expert presumably holds a truth-directed line of reasoning to support the belief. Importantly, epistemic dependence and the expert-layman distinction suggest that structure informs belief, as agents are justified in believing that elected or appointed politicians have at least some relevant knowledge.

Epistemic dependence allows agents to hold rational beliefs without direct responsibility, situating rationality as a world-responsive concept. Today's agents are epistemically dependent, and their reliance on others for epistemic support does not make them irrational. While an ideal understanding of epistemic rationality would hold that agents can individually rationalize their beliefs, this desire overlooks the reality and variety of beliefs that agents actually hold, which has presumably increased over time in response to growing access to information. As a result, the reality of rationality must adapt with the scope of information and the persistence of belief formation. An agent faced with an overwhelming variety of information on topics she knows

little about may be more likely to defer to experts on those topics, not *resist forming a belief* on that topic. While, epistemically, an agent should not maintain high confidence in a belief without reasons, passive belief formation and the expert-layman distinction are inescapable. This disconnect between how agents ideally ought to be and how they rationally exist in a broad and changing world rests at the core of disagreement about rationality. Harwig (1985) suggests that epistemological individualism, when applied to the true nature of agents, would render overwhelmingly irrational beliefs:

But I think we must say that B's belief is rationally justified—even if he does not know or understand what A's reasons are—if we do not wish to be forced to conclude that a very large percentage of beliefs in any complex culture are simply and unavoidably irrational or nonrational. For, in such cultures, more is known that is relevant to the truth of one's beliefs than anyone could know by himself. And surely it would be paradoxical for epistemologists to maintain that the more that is known in a culture, the less rational the beliefs of individuals in that culture (339).

However, the expert-layman distinction, while necessary, presents various issues and dangers. Just as the layman would not be responsible for understanding or verifying the reasons that an expert has to believe something, she also faces the issue of separating experts from frauds. The overwhelming access to other people's opinions can influence an agent to acquire a belief that she would not otherwise, and the increased access to agents who purport to be experts but are not would only muddy the waters. An agent's increased access to opinions she believes to be authoritative on platforms that reward engagement without necessarily fact-checking certain claims (Twitter or Facebook⁷), could bring an agent to trust the opinion of popular users like celebrities or politicians, whose social status may outrank their expertise. The tension between popularity and merit is obviously not unique to epistemology, but the likelihood that an agent

⁷ It is important to note that Twitter and Facebook fact-check some posts that include false information, but users have sued Meta over its promotion of “scam” ads or deceptive advertisements. See *Calise v. Meta Platforms, Inc.* (2022). In this case, however, the court sided with Meta. (*Calise v. Meta Platforms, Inc.*, 21-cv-06186-JSW (N.D. Cal. Apr. 27, 2022))

mistakes society's interest in an individual with an endorsement of that person's opinions or ideas is relevant to her ability to form her own beliefs about the world.

This illustrates that, while the idea that B is justified in believing that A has reasons to believe *X* in light of A's authority as an expert (whether or not this component is true) is rational, an agent may conflate this with the idea that B is justified in believing *X*. The far-removed nature of the justified belief may suggest that, while an agent is rational, rationality does not connect the agent herself to direct evidence or truth. In light of this, Hardwig doubles down, arguing that even experts in contemporary society may not *know* things individually but are still justified in believing them in light of their connection to other experts, as with scientific research (346). In this way, the only *knowledge* is the knowledge of the group as a whole.

Community based inquiry offers great promise. In the face of overwhelming growth in information and technology, Hardwig's "community" knowledge may be the only way to react to a hyperconnected reality (349). However, although people *are* physically connected in terms of communication, they *ought* to be connected epistemically as well. Hardwig's analysis of the expert-layman distinction and community knowledge illustrates that people can understand the world around them better together. As Hardwig illustrates that the knowledge of the community extends beyond what any one person can presumably know, her collaboration is important to rationalizing the world around her in light of her increased access to novel concepts and new problems.

As a result, a community based epistemology can save individual agents from seemingly irrational beliefs. If the promise of external evidence and opinion were a central component to belief formation and conviction, a person may adopt a better formed belief. In contemporary society, fragmentation may be a matter of maintaining an allegiance to epistemic individualism

when social and epistemic structures encourage collaboration. Today, ill-informed beliefs reach greater audiences and are more numerous just as a matter of scope. There is an intense tension between an agent's inability to verify each of her beliefs and her ability to broadcast her half-baked opinions. As a result, trust is precarious. An individual cannot specialize *or* verify her sources and therefore lacks reasons *not to trust* (if trust is natural). To overcome these issues, society must reinforce a greater allegiance to evidence and reasoning. Harnessing the power of epistemic dependence and the expert-layman distinction through the structural augmentation of epistemically good reasoning or programs would allow agents to act rationally *in an epistemically good way*. In this way, a community based epistemology is not enough unless it centers *good reasoning* in the community.

Part IV: Complicating Theoretical Factors for Epistemic Rationality

In practice, epistemic rationality is complicated. In the formal or theoretical sense, studies of epistemic rationality test if these boundaries and shortcomings of rationality also exist in a vacuum. Shorter-form debates regarding the rational value of various epistemic puzzles aim to point out discrepancies in an agent's rational capacity. These inquiries test if rationality should be an assumed trait of agents as individuals in society. Dealing primarily with precise examples that illustrate possible "glitches" in an agent's rational capacity, these theorists, many of whom stand at the center of my epistemic inquiry, convey the nuance or imperfection of an agent's rationality. They differ on whether certain epistemic cases prove that the individual is irrational in at least some cases. However, it is unclear, regardless of the conclusions of these theorists, if the irrationality they observe connects to greater considerations concerning the role of the individual and her ability to rationally operate in the world around her. While the literature lacks consensus on whether or not these epistemic puzzles can be squared, acknowledging the

ambiguity of these issues in the broader scheme of their applications in society bridges the gap between rational belief and *epistemically good* beliefs. In this way, it is helpful to peel back the layers of contemporary society to understand whether today's agents are rational in theoretical or formal, logical circumstances.

The debate surrounding what contributes to justification manifests itself in a variety of scenarios that call into question the nature of epistemic rationality. An epistemically dependent structure of justification effectively maps on current, community-based scenarios. However, certain beliefs, when assessed in a vacuum, can present as irrational. Analyzing a belief in the context of the community or society at-large generally resolves these issues, but the additional steps it takes to do so are largely impractical. This critique would argue that, in holding a belief, the agent should also immediately possess justification. In these cases, immediacy is a necessary component of judging a belief's rationality. While having justification on hand at all times benefits the agent, placing such an intense constraint on agency undermines the intention to rationalize the behavior of contemporary agents. A variety of epistemic puzzles encapsulate this tension between the attractiveness of defining certain beliefs as irrational and attempts to rationalize these beliefs for the sake of society. Additionally, the intricate and complicated nature of these puzzles emphasizes the importance of analyzing various relevant epistemic elements to understand how these manifest in agents.

Doxastic Incontinence and Epistemic Akrasia

While Harwig's account of epistemic dependence rationalizes the account of the agent who has inadequate evidence yet persists in a belief, situations in which an agent holds overwhelming evidence to warrant a belief and fails to hold that belief present issues for accounts of epistemic rationality. An agent's beliefs are often not instantaneously tethered to her

reasons for believing. Passive belief is a seemingly inescapable component of living and thinking just as emotionally-informed beliefs may not present a true *reason*. However, this reality that people naturally form beliefs without reason does not necessarily entail a sense of rationality or epistemic warrant. John Heil (1984) analyzes doxastic responsibility, suggesting that we tend to hold people responsible for their beliefs just as we do with actions, to present an account of doxastic incontinence (8).⁸ Heil analyzes an agent's belief about her own beliefs, most particularly her confidence in whether her beliefs are warranted. To Heil, the doxastically incontinent person holds certain beliefs despite her understanding that she ought not do so.

An agent experiencing doxastic incontinence has all relevant evidence at their disposal yet chooses the belief that is less warranted. Importantly, at the core of doxastic incontinence is the perspective of the agent. To Heil, in order for an agent to experience doxastic incontinence, *she* must believe her belief is unwarranted (even if this belief is mistaken) (66-67). In this way an agent could only be incontinent in certain, precise instances, for example:

Not Incontinent, but epistemically bad: Sam believes that his car is the fastest of his friends' but he has seen his friends' cars drive faster.

Incontinent (1): Sam believes that his car is the fastest of his friends' but thinks that this belief is unwarranted because his friends' cars have stronger engines and have driven faster in the past.

Incontinent (2): Sam believes that his car is the fastest of his friends' but thinks that his belief is unwarranted after seeing his friends' cars drive faster. His belief that his car is the fastest was, in fact, true, but he was mistaken that his belief was unwarranted.

The proportionality of this consideration allows for agents to make mistakes or miscalculations but argues that rational agents must act and think reasonably in light of their evidence. Doxastic incontinence's inverse, doxastic continence, which Heil argues is an epistemic virtue, only deals with an agent's ability to effectively respond to her evidence (70). These occurrences in which an agent ineffectively judges her evidence are epistemically bad, but

⁸ This project assumes that doxastic incontinence can occur.

they are not irrational. Heil's understanding of doxastic agency settles issues relating to epistemic agency, but it presents questions surrounding general epistemic virtue. Heil uncovers a broad gap between what we can expect of rational agents and what we as a society may want to expect of them.

Epistemic akrasia⁹ deals with a similar angle to Heil's doxastic incontinence in its focus on unwarranted belief. However, epistemically akratic¹⁰ beliefs arouse intense contemporary disagreement regarding higher-order evidence and rationality. Sophie Horowitz¹¹ (2014) argues that epistemic akrasia, which occurs when an agent has a high level of confidence in a belief, P, while also believing with high confidence that their evidence doesn't support P, is irrational because it violates the Non-Akrasia Constraint (1). Horowitz's Non-Akrasia Constraint argues that an agent cannot rationally have high confidence in a belief, P, *and* the fact that her evidence does not support P. Level-Splitting views in which epistemic akrasia is rationalized through the possibility of misleading higher-order¹² evidence encouraging the akratic view are, to Horowitz, false because of their dismissal of the Non-Akrasia Constraint (741). In other words, if higher order evidence can rationalize an epistemically akratic belief, Horowitz dismisses it simply because it rationalizes a concept that, to her, is inescapably irrational.

⁹ The term is a bit of a misnomer. Unlike Classical weakness of will or akratic action, it does not contain the condition that the agent *knows* they ought not hold a certain belief, as weakness of will suggests that an agent knows they ought not act in a certain way but they do it despite holding that knowledge. The epistemically akratic agent simply knows they are *inadequately supported* in this belief because their evidence does not support it. This is not to say that they know they are *wrong* in doing so.

¹⁰ As with doxastic incontinence, we will assume that epistemic akrasia exists (See Borgoni and Luthra (2017) for further discussion and support).

¹¹ Many theorists agree with Horowitz' account of epistemic akrasia (see Christensen (2022) and Greco (2014)).

¹² Allen Coates (2012) suggests in various cases that we can be rationally akratic about our understanding of our own beliefs, as I can believe my beliefs are irrational in light of my evidence but actual be rational having been misled by the evidence that led me to think I was irrational in my belief. Heil, however, may regard this as the second form of doxastic incontinence.

However, Horowitz and Heil digress on where they draw the line for rationality. While epistemic akrasia and doxastic incontinence illustrate similar situations, Marco Tiozzo (2019), suggests that Horowitz creates a false, hard line in her judgment of Level-Splitting as irrational. Tiozzo argues that Horowitz conflates two notions of epistemic rationality, using a coherence theory to judge higher-order evidence when supporters of Level-Splitting use a reasons-responsiveness approach (as I believe Heil does) (921). Tiozzo suggests a coherence approach which argues that beliefs must conform to a structure, which epistemic akrasia fails to do, while a reasons-responsiveness approach finds that agents must effectively respond to their evidence, as cases of Level-Splitting with misleading higher-order evidence do (920). Tiozzo argues that Horowitz applies her coherence approach to Level-Splitting when that is not the case for those who initially presented the view, allowing her to falsely or inadequately judge it as irrational (922). Heil and Tiozzo both argue that agents should not be accountable for misleading evidence as a point of rationality. From this, judgments of rationality are controlled by their evidential boundaries. Horowitz creates narrow lines that render some beliefs irrational. Conversely, Heil and Tiozzo open judgements to multiple levels of relevant evidence to rationalize many beliefs. Both views present dangers in regards to accepting misleading information.

Admittedly, doxastic incontinence and epistemic akrasia present scenarios in which beliefs could be irrational. Although these irrational beliefs could occur, the likelihood of these beliefs are outweighed by the likelihood of Heil and Tiozzo's explanations for seemingly irrational beliefs. In this way, while epistemic akrasia of primary beliefs and evidence may be irrational, Level-Splitting views that include higher-order evidence can rationalize the chain of belief as a whole. This supports the inclusion of higher-order evidence and broadened boundaries

for justification. In a vacuum, epistemic akrasia is irrational. However, epistemic akrasia's irrationality simply encourages the inclusion of higher-order evidence to solve this paradox.

Heil's account illustrates that rationality does not entail ideal epistemic agency. In essence, the difference between rationality and ideal agency suggests that agents are fallible, but their errors do not make them irrational. Although this supports the notion that epistemic agents are rational agents, it emphasizes that rationality does not rid agents of intricate errors that affect their decisions and beliefs. In relation to an all things considered understanding of rationality, the gaps between the truth of an agent's evidence and her discernment of that evidence are inescapable. In light of these weaknesses, untangling epistemic intricacies through judgements of rationality may be insufficient. Instead, realigning society with an understanding of the reality of hazardous and pervasive non-ideal epistemology may better protect agents from the effects of their shortcomings.

A community based epistemology aligns with Tiozzo and Heil's desire to judge an agent's rationality based on her response to evidence. In this epistemically-centered reality, epistemic peers are able to talk to each other without intense skepticism, as each agent is expected to prioritize epistemically good habits, which makes their contributions easier to accept. This allows the community as a whole to work together towards new knowledge. A community based epistemology relieves the individual agent of much of the burden in verifying her information, looking towards the epistemic community and epistemic structures to square these issues. Additionally, the likelihood that the community as a whole could be misled by the same evidence is a relevant point of discussion. While even in the epistemic community people like to view themselves as individuals, epistemic bubbles may threaten an agent's ability to judge her evidence. However, if society as a whole endorses a good community based epistemology, it is

unlikely that individuals would spiral into a level of groupthink that would pervade their experiences, as factions and disagreement are common and inescapable in society.

Epistemic Circularity

Higher-order evidence may square the issues of epistemic rationality, but it carries new concerns. Epistemic circularity presents a compounding issue with the possibility of misleading higher-order evidence. While higher-order evidence may relieve the agent of her burden to rationally find it reliable, epistemic circularity may present issues in an agent's ability to reason through her evidence. Epistemic circularity occurs when an agent forms her judgment of the trustworthiness of a belief source by depending on that belief source in her reasoning. For example, an agent's belief in the trustworthiness of X based on X's testimony about her own trustworthiness is obviously a weak chain of justification.

However, epistemic circularity can be solved through epistemic accountability in the community. Michael Bergmann (2004), in "Epistemic Circularity: Malignant and Benign," suggests that epistemic circularity is not necessarily irrational. However, Bergmann suggests that these circular arguments are epistemically "pathetic," jeopardizing an agent's ability to defend her own views (720). Baron Reed (2006) argues that the circularity of common sense saves the epistemically circular belief by extension, as by conceding that common sense exists, the justification of an epistemically circular belief through common sense is rational. Reed finds that common sense follows from Bergmann's understanding that agents are not skeptical about their own cognitive faculties and therefore do not have to square an agent's doubts about her own cognitive faculties (186). Reed argues that Bergmann's interest in common sense to rationalize epistemic circularity erases the negative impacts of the agent through factors like prejudice and wishful thinking which connect to common sense (195). The rational agent protected by common

sense still falls victim to the pull of prejudice and wishful thinking in ways that undermine her reasoning skills. This illustrates the difference between the threshold for rationality and what is generally accepted as good reasoning.

Similar to Heil and Tiozzo's solutions for doxastic incontinence and epistemic akrasia, the agent who engages in epistemically circular reasoning reacts rationally in light of her evidence. While it is generally epistemically bad to endorse a tautology, epistemic circularity illustrates that the challenge of possessing poor evidence does not make an agent irrational. If anything, this suggests that the cure to circularity is the pursuit of additional evidence without making one's mind up about a state of affairs. Epistemic circularity highlights the relevance of source trustworthiness and suggests that rationality does little to quell these issues. A rational belief is not necessarily an intuitive one, and epistemic circularity conveys that important components of epistemology, those that relate to an agent's role within society, sit beyond measures of rationality. The general tendency to situate rationality as the primary measure of epistemology in the agent overlooks the likelihood of situations that are rational but epistemically precarious. It is clear that, when faced with skepticism, epistemically circular reasoning crumbles.

In society, epistemic circularity is an example of what makes Hardwig's expert-layman distinction dangerous. An agent's ability to judge another agent's epistemic superiority often deals with the testimony of that agent, which easily slips into circularity. A glimmer of hope for the agent who professes epistemically weak belief is that, within the epistemically virtuous community, the weakness of epistemic circularity does not stand. If society is framed in a way that endorses a reasonable, community based epistemology, the weakness of an agent's judgment of source reliability is less consequential. These misfires, when expressed beyond the agent, are

obviously weak. A discussion in which at least one party maintains an allegiance to epistemically good reasoning and encourages those around her to utilize those skills follows:

Agent A: I think that Jim Jones would be a great president.

Agent B: Why is that?

Agent A: Because I saw a speech where he said he had all of the qualities of a great president.

Agent B: And you believe him? That's an absurd reason to think he would be a great president.

This notion of accountability for Agent A's misfire would exist in the community-centered epistemic society to overcome the gaps that simple measures of rationality leave behind. Because this society would value community synthesis as a matter of support and justification, it would also be the case that Agent A may take Agent B's criticism to heart, losing confidence in the justification that supports her belief in Jim Jones' merit. None of this, however, calls into question Agent A's rationality. In this way, a community based epistemology allows agents to go beyond the threshold of rationality towards logic and truth.

Practical Impacts of Theoretical Issues

Doxastic incontinence, epistemic akrasia, and epistemic circularity present rational and flawed structures of belief. These issues, coupled with the Hardwigian reality that epistemic and political structures influence trust and belief, suggest that agents are ill-equipped or ill-supported in forming well-reasoned beliefs in many cases. As a result, structural change is necessary to encourage epistemically better reasoning. While cultivating epistemically virtuous agents would deter them from engaging in poor reasoning, the levels of government involvement that go into any "reeducation" would likely violate cherished individual rights. Additionally, changing the *nature of the agent* so that she does not engage in doxastic incontinence may be impossible and could not practically occur on a universal scale for all rational agents. Accordingly, as a matter of scope, creating epistemic structures in society that acknowledge the epistemically flawed nature

of agents and encourage better reasoning skills create better beliefs without deeply violating the rights of individuals¹³. Understanding where this reform comes into play is complicated, but understanding the epistemic tension that exists in society serves as a first step in correcting it.

Part V: Dangers of the Contemporary Epistemic Community

Today's epistemic community, although deeply connected, faces intense factions. The Internet allows these factions to grow beyond geographical boundaries, giving legs to issues that do not necessarily pertain to the people who believe in them. People have the freedom to research and defend issues happening across the world, depriving these issues of personal connection while exponentially augmenting their reach. Augmented interest also brings disinterest. The rise in information suggests that no one piece of information can be *that* important, creating a rise in apathy. As a result, epistemic dependence allows people with no grounded experience in a certain topic to feel tethered to it from thousands of miles away. This suggests agents, while rational, are untethered from the traditional evidence that contributes to reasoning.

The epistemic community, while it possesses the ability to rationalize puzzling reactions to insufficient or misleading information, presumably produces the inverse problem as well, reinforcing epistemically bad beliefs. Theorists like C. Thi Nguyen (2020) have pinpointed the epistemic causes of division. In "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles," Nguyen suggests that the reinforcement of division and extremism, which manifests in the form of "fake news" on social media, creates "post-truth" epistemic bubbles which may bloat into echo chambers. While epistemic bubbles are easily escapable, as an agent can "pop" the bubble by including relevant information, Echo chambers shield people from views they disagree with and reinforce biased or

¹³ Of course, the rights of corporations sit in the periphery, but that discussion exists outside the scope of this thesis.

false information (141). Nguyen finds that people are epistemically plugged into systems like Facebook and Instagram that may inherently create an epistemic bubble, “a social epistemic structure which has inadequate coverage through a process of exclusion by omission” (143). The permanent solution to this bubble is for any agent to entertain all available information, but that is an impractical process for each belief an agent may hold. While a person can be saved from an epistemic bubble by including all relevant perspectives and evidence when forming a belief, this isolation can transform into an echo chamber when the belief formation process involves deliberate censorship (147). Once in an echo chamber, a person may be led to believe that their in-group is independent while the rest of the world is brain-washed (148). In an echo chamber, rational yet flawed reasoning goes unchecked. Epistemic circularity is accepted, if not encouraged, by those who view their environment as *the* place to form good beliefs. To this end, echo chambers represent the worst kind of epistemic community: that which encourages epistemically *bad* beliefs by design.

The immense danger of echo chambers is close to home. Deep epistemic considerations relating to truth and beliefs are relevant to the way Americans interact with others, vote, and perform other actions in society. In each of these environments, an agent who engages in epistemically bad reasoning is unlikely to face any questioning or pushback for these beliefs. As a result, these ill-informed beliefs live within the epistemic bubble or echo chamber as perfectly warranted, which, over time, reinforces the already epistemically weak structure that these beliefs are formed within. While a community based epistemology saves the agent from accusations of irrationality in either of these cases, Nguyen illustrates that, in society, community-based reasoning can be utterly corrosive.

However, the way society is structured around these agents may be to blame. As the prior discussion of Tiozzo, Hiel, and Bergmann illustrates, agents are only responsible for acting rationally in light of their evidence. Beyond rationality, society itself may have to create spaces that encourage epistemically good reasoning in order to save their agents from the dangers of misleading evidence. The social epistemic systems within society that encourage interaction and discussion, those in which agents express their beliefs, ought to create a forum in which epistemically poor reasoning is not rewarded. Nguyen's solution to echo chambers, the "social epistemic reboot," changes the structure of evidence acquisition, not the mechanisms the rational agent uses to form beliefs. The agent who engages in a social epistemic reboot must expand their sources of evidence without an allegiance to background belief and with a tentative trust in their sources (157). While this approach does not rid the agent of any epistemically bad reasoning, it allows them to use their rationality effectively, achieving the object of their inquiries and beliefs. If not for the sake of individual agents, society should create epistemically good structures for the sake of society and its effectiveness.

Just as Nguyen suggests, in order to make the rational yet flawed agent act effectively within society, the epistemically centered aspects of society must accommodate and remediate these flaws. A society structured with an eye to the benefits of a community based epistemology is less likely to produce the issues of the echo chamber. Epistemic social structures that mirror those in Nguyen's social epistemic reboot make it less likely that agents engage in epistemically bad reasoning or pass those beliefs onto others. Similarly, a system that punishes or questions epistemically bad reasoning guards the community as a whole from transferring epistemically bad beliefs. An epistemically-centered community allows people to learn from one another and use an epistemic peer's reasoning as their own, but it also encourages epistemic peers to question

each others' beliefs. In this structure, a system inspired by the power of the community, group interaction is a valued aspect of reasoning and thus instills a responsibility for agents to respect the reasoning process and hold others accountable to do the same. Structural epistemic virtue encourages the epistemic virtue of the individual.

In light of this analysis, to return to the Ancients, Plato's Cave presents an epistemic community just as today's issues exist within an epistemic community. Accordingly, the community aspect of epistemology does little to guard agents from its dangers. As Nguyen illustrates, the epistemic community can augment epistemically bad beliefs, motivating rational agents to engage in poor reasoning. The rationality of those in the cave does not encourage them to question the projections they see on the wall. Rationality suggests that agents are justified in believing the truth of the projections and even unsupported in believing there is a world beyond the cave wall. We are in the cave today just as we were in Plato's time. Acknowledging this reality and creating a more truth-directed cave points rational agents toward the truth, even if they do not arrive at it themselves. Importantly, restructuring society with an eye to epistemic virtue requires looking beyond the requirements of rationality, as rationality is not adequate to encourage epistemically good reasoning in many cases. Aiming beyond rationality requires analyzing who chooses and puppets the artifacts in the cave.

In contemporary society, the epistemic community trusts the puppeteers to a degree, which is encouraged by a measure of rationality. Many people believed in the merit of what former President Donald Trump tweeted during his presidency, not necessarily because of his direct expertise on a given subject, but due to his standing and resources as President of the United States.¹⁴ Rationally, people *should* be able to believe that what the President says is

¹⁴ Some of former President Trump's tweets regarding the 2020 election were flagged by Twitter for misinformation and have since been proven false by *FactCheck.org* (see Robertson, Farley, and Rieder).

supported by facts and reason. This is not to say that rational actors are justified in blindly following a politician's words, as politicians are not generally known for their authenticity. Trump's trajectory from businessman to TV personality to President¹⁵ complicates his ethos. However, we cannot fault someone for believing in the merit of a person who was put into power by millions of people. Contemporary society must address this precarity, as influential actors within society hold an even larger megaphone on the internet than they did before social media. While we cannot expect more from agents if rationality is our only measure, encouraging epistemically good reasoning in a systematic way, which includes understanding the role of puppeteers and the systems that put them in power, motivates agents to acquire better beliefs.

Part VI: Beyond Rationality: Capturing Epistemic Virtue

The previous analysis of epistemic rationality illustrates that agents are epistemically rational but still produce epistemically bad beliefs. As a result, rationality is not an adequate threshold to measure how an agent reasons. In essence, the rational agency that ethical and political theory centers as evidence of an ability to fulfill these theories fails to explain today's most pervasive issues. Rationality is not evidence for reliable, good reasoning. This threatens whether these theories can help create just or ethical societies if they do not account for an agent's shortcomings. These solutions must go beyond rational agency.

The epistemically virtuous agent reasons through her evidence in an epistemically better way than what rationality can expect of her, while a normal rational agent takes an expert at face value because of the expert/layman distinction. The epistemically virtuous agent conducts further research and verifies the qualifications of her expert. Importantly, she still does not need to *know* the information that her expert purports to know, as that poses an impractical threshold even for

¹⁵ Other examples of TV personalities-turned-presidents include former U.S. President Ronald Reagan and current Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

epistemic goodness. Her going beyond the qualifications of rationality to double check evidence makes her more likely to gather truth-grounded beliefs. Similarly, she may consult multiple experts and multiple sources, not taking any at face value. If she chooses to call in multiple plumbers before making a decision on what to do with her pipes, the epistemically virtuous agent allows evidence to guide her beliefs and actions.

In treating the issues that exist beyond measures of rationality, those relating to patently bad reasoning or inability to discern a source's merit, social systems must be structured to expose agents to enough evidence to create well-informed beliefs. While society holds agents accountable for their beliefs and the confidence they have in their opinions, the system as a whole can structurally encourage epistemically good reasoning and influence agents to *want* to engage in this way of thinking. On the academic level, these positive consequences exist, as Harwig suggests, in the form of scientific breakthroughs and new knowledge. On social media, users who want access to reliable information could lobby companies to implement fact-checking. In government, this reasoning could lead to a greater understanding of the true ends of decision making and public policy, whether or not that alleviates gridlock¹⁶ at the highest levels. To bridge the gap between the power of corporations and the role of government, the government could offer tax breaks for epistemically-conscious corporations.¹⁷ The media, which influences what information reaches individual agents, could adopt additional requirements for journalistic integrity that acknowledge the fallibility of their audience and the power they possess in omitting or publishing certain information. While these outcomes may be overly optimistic,

¹⁶ If anything, an epistemic restructuring would encourage agents to be more skeptical of and less patient with their elected representatives. In this sense, Harwig's fears with the expert-layman distinction would be assuaged.

¹⁷ These tax breaks would operate similarly to tax breaks for environmentally conscious corporations.

the promise of a community based epistemology allows for society to push agents towards their fullest epistemic potential, whether or not these maximum capabilities are practically achievable.

Why Defer to Theory?

An immense gap exists between today's epistemic community and the ideal or assumed epistemic community. Theory requires rational agency, but this thesis illustrates that agency inadequately guards against issues like echo chambers. Clearly, factions are an inescapable fixture of political life.¹⁸ However, online echo chambers present worldwide division in a way that is untethered to fact, and the internet makes the size of factions less relevant to their impact. When inside a network of echo chambers, one cannot possibly influence enough other people to leave the comfort of their echo chambers to make a societal impact. People do not leave their comfortable communities for the sake of philosophy.

Within theory, these ideas fit more clearly. Epistemology does not stick out oddly in a book of political theory as it may in a Twitter feed. Because political theory is meant to inquire and theorize about issues like justice and stability, epistemology can better inform these aims. In regards to whether political theory can effectively enact change, political theory is the basis of political life. It informs political action and it underpins all political systems. There are no better people to task with helping create these changes than the people who influenced the structure of contemporary politics. Deferring to the philosopher will not fix today's issues quickly. However, just as these issues are nuanced, the augmentation of epistemic virtue is gradual. Political theory can systematically influence the societal conception of belief and reasoning in a practical way, even if it is a few steps removed from fixing these problems. Just as the cure to epistemic vice is a matter of reasoning, beginning with epistemically centered political theory encourages

¹⁸ See Madison in *Federalist Paper* No. 10.

epistemic goodness at every level. This chain of change is community based epistemology in action and encourages that sort of reasoning in everyday agents. If theory accepts the community based epistemology as an important component of ideal society, any changes to society that come from theory are informed by these epistemically informed ideas. This influences society naturally, shaping liberal political systems into epistemically better environments, not demanding that society change rapidly for the sake of epistemology.

Part VII: Epistemic Virtue and Rationality in Political Theory

While it may be impractical to achieve Nguyen's social epistemic reboot in contemporary society, political theory presents the unique opportunity to reevaluate the understanding of how political systems ought to be structured in light of these epistemic suggestions. Reforming the understanding of epistemic rationality and increasing a cognizance of the impacts of epistemic deficiency in political theory could resituate a theorist's priorities when developing the ideal political system. In order to explore how these suggestions would affect political theory, the following analysis utilizes contemporary theorists John Rawls and Robert Nozick to understand how greater attention to epistemic considerations relates to broader theoretical political concerns. This section will analyze various introductory elements of their works and discern where epistemic rationality and, later, epistemic virtue come into play.

What is the Role of Political Theory?

Because this project analyzes various pervasive epistemic issues that produce negative practical consequences in society, approaching these complications from a theoretical perspective is a step backwards. Political theory is not public policy or social programming. It does not compel people to make certain changes on a certain time table. However, political theory encourages the reflection and the thoughtfulness of the epistemic community. Just as this

project has sought to understand epistemic oughts, political theory creates an avenue to apply these findings. While everyday people may not react to epistemic theory, an understanding of epistemic rationality and epistemic virtue can directly and effectively inform political theory by setting the thresholds of how agents ought to think. Political theory then informs political society, making its way into constitutions and government systems or calls for reform. This trend, from theory to practice, suggests that these epistemic considerations are best suited to political theory.

Michael Walzer (2000), in “Social Criticism and Social Theory,” advocates for theory as a “source of inspiration” for criticism:

So we have good critics without a good theory and--hypothetically for now, though I will provide some examples later on--good theories that don't produce good criticism. Hence, it would appear that a good theory isn't a sufficient cause of accuracy and timeliness, nor even a necessary cause. But I concede that it is a possible help, a possible source of critical inspiration. To have in hand a good theoretical account of the course of history and the structure of society makes it more likely that critics will recognize avoidable evils and that they will describe those evils correctly. And this same theoretical account makes it less likely that they will be deterred from speaking out when they should by some false understanding of the actual situation or of their own responsibilities (7-8).

Walzer's argument for theory and criticism mirrors the role of recognition that I advocate for in regards to the epistemic community. Just as theory as a whole encourages reflection and recognition, the application of epistemic considerations within theory only reinforces these traits. Walzer emphasizes the important role of recognition, as addressing the concerns or “evils” that exist contribute to a more well-informed understanding of the state of affairs. Effective critics are those who exercise good epistemic judgment in light of their sources and use their findings to inform their actions and critiques. This chain of events suggests that, for the critic to effectively do her job and encourage social change, it is to her benefit to be epistemically aware. Including epistemic considerations in a theory that is meant to encourage productive epistemic reasoning

presents a two-fold endorsement of effective epistemic action within society. Just as the critic reads theory to inform her criticism, implementing warnings or analysis regarding the nuances of epistemic rationality further cements Walzer's take. This is not to say that theorists don't *think* about epistemic considerations to inform their theory. As evidenced through this project thus far, it is equally important that an agent (in this case, a theorist), can adequately and clearly *articulate* relevant components of evidence, of which, as we have explored, epistemic rationality is definitely one.

As a discipline, political philosophy has great impacts on our conception of political life. John Rawls (2001), in *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, suggests that political philosophy provides order amongst political conflict, establishes an orientation towards the possibility of achieving rational and reasonable ends, offers opportunities for reconciliation in the way we view the political world, and allows us to probe the limits of political philosophy as discipline (1-6). Political philosophy serves as its own form of reflection, allowing us to reevaluate the role and effectiveness of political systems. Within each of these exercises, the importance of epistemic considerations is dually relevant, as epistemically good reasoning is important to encourage a political system that exercises epistemically good reasoning.

While Rawls leads by example, presenting principles and thought experiments that are reasonable and well-informed, it is not the case that these efforts ensure that his successors adopt the same approach. It is uncharitable to find Rawls responsible for others' interpretations of his work, but it is for the sake of his theory and lifespan beyond Rawls that he makes it most conducive to effective application and interpretation. This natural transfer of power, the power of interpretation and belief, from one thinker to another exemplifies the natural trend of a community based epistemology. Discussion and careful consideration is a cornerstone of

philosophical inquiry, but it is important that these ideas make their way into the content of theory, encouraging society as a whole to adopt these tendencies.

My own propensity to feel less trusting of others' interpretations of political theory follows from this paper's understanding of how, although agents are rational, they may engage in patently bad reasoning. The role of good political philosophy, as an influence or instruction manual, is to promote effective discourse. Presenting more explicit understandings and recommendations regarding agents in the *epistemic sense* makes these theories clearer in their perceptions of the nature of agents. Robert Nozick's (1974) *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* takes these concerns to heart. The structure of Nozick's inquiry, beginning in Locke's state of nature and moving methodically into the State, conveys a keen awareness of how reality relates to ideal theory. Nozick argues that, "investigating [the state of nature's] nature and defects is of crucial importance to deciding whether there should be a state rather than anarchy" (5). The relationship between nature and government illustrates that analyzing each step into government serves to justify each move in effective political society. An explicit analysis of the nature of belief in man, whether or not it is pointed or exhaustive, benefits the interpreter and the application of these theories, encouraging systems that compel agents to engage in epistemically good reasoning and, by extension, well informed action.

Epistemic Rationality and Epistemic Virtue in Political Philosophy

Advancing an epistemically centered political philosophy does not necessitate a particular structural approach to any other aspects of political life. Theorists with otherwise competing views could both adopt a community based epistemology as a matter of making their theory more responsive to the nature of agents, and including this additional consideration would not warp the aims of their theory. Including epistemic rationality in political theory simply illustrates

an awareness of the intricate nature of rationality, which places a greater burden on the political system to compensate for these issues if it aims to create an effectively operating society.

Epistemic issues are pervasive in contemporary society. It may seem archaic to suggest that the solution to widespread misinformation and polarization is to defer to the philosopher, but applying epistemic considerations to political theory ensures that these concerns are not lost in the shuffle or omitted from the epistemic bubble. Although a few steps removed from solving the consequences of epistemically bad reasoning in society, compelling theorists to advance their own understanding of the epistemic nature of man and the nature of epistemic rationality draws a direct connection between these concerns and the political theory they advance. As with Walzer, this calculated understanding of the impact of theory, if only to inform critics and actors to be more deliberate, makes its way into society.

Just as Rawls suggests that we must accommodate reasonable pluralism as a fact of society, non-ideal epistemology seems similarly situated (6). It is obviously not the case that we can impose a universal line of reasoning or universal belief, but we can create a system that encourages productive and effective belief formation. To Rawls, a goal of political philosophy and theories of justice, strict compliance, “probes the limits of the realistically practicable, that is, how far in our world (given its laws and tendencies) a democratic regime can attain complete realization of its appropriate political values” (13). This tension acknowledges that cooperation and buy-in is necessary for effective governance. It is difficult to conceive of a society where agents act as they ought and universally comply with certain principles. From this end, prior to advancing this system, theories must create an informed account of how agents think and act. Rawls does not ignore the epistemic considerations that sit in the margins of this concern so much as omit them from explicit discussion. Rawls acknowledges that stability relies on

compliant agents, but, as illustrated in this paper's discussion of epistemic rationality, agency does not entail ideal reasoning or the condition that an agent possesses a natural interest in aligning with rules or principles.

Rawls argues that, amongst reasonable pluralism, "a well-ordered society is a society effectively regulated by a public conception of justice" (31). Contemporary society lacks a public conception of justice by virtue of its globalized and factious nature. Many issues discussed on social media may sit outside of the governance of Rawls' public conception of justice, and the people engaging in those conversations lack a public conception of justice. As a result, the commonality that governs Rawls' agents does not exist. Of course, this is not Rawls' problem. The actions of non-ideal agents in a globalized, non-ideal society should not reflect too negatively on ideal theories of justice. If anything, this difference illustrates the gap between cherished theories of justice and today's society, emphasizing the importance of finding how to bring them together.

To this end, Rawls' reflective equilibrium, which first occurs narrowly when an agent adopts a conception of justice and makes other judgements in line with that conception and occurs widely when someone has considered different conceptions and argument against their chosen conception of justice, laments the same issues presented by the inadequacy of epistemic rationality:

... wide reflective equilibrium (still in the case of one person) that reflective equilibrium reached when someone has carefully considered alternative conceptions of justice and the force of various arguments for them. More exactly, this person has considered the leading conceptions of political justice found in our philosophical tradition (including views critical of the concept of justice itself (some think Marx's view is an example)), and has weighed the force of the different philosophical and other reasons for them. In this case, we suppose this person's general convictions, first principles, and particular judgments are in line; but now the reflective equilibrium is wide, given the wide-ranging reflection and possibly many changes of view that have preceded it. Wide and not narrow reflective equilibrium is plainly the important concept (31).

Clearly, many agents in today's society have not reached Rawls' wide reflective equilibrium. Importantly, reflective equilibrium deals with a public conception of justice, not a comprehensive doctrine to which all citizens must adhere (34). A society with agents who reach wide reflective equilibrium must encourage these agents to exercise their reasoning continuously, not just as a matter of first principles. Reflective equilibrium encourages agents to believe in a certain conception of justice *because it is the best*, not because their government forces them to. Rawls emphasizes the relevance of careful deliberation and consideration of other conceptions of political justice to inform which conception is best. As a result, agents hold an interest in the affairs of their society. Today's political issues often align with political affiliation and call into question whether people believe something simply because their party tells them to. Wide reflective equilibrium fights against this understanding of justice (as political issues are closely tied with conceptions of justice).

Applying a community based epistemology to Rawls requires directly contradicting Rawls' work as it stands because of the fact of reasonable pluralism. A society that implements a community based epistemology would insufficiently achieve its end if it encourages epistemically good reasoning or wide reflective equilibrium only in political matters. While Rawls draws an important line between the role of government and comprehensive doctrines, for the sake of epistemic virtue, wide reflective equilibrium must extend to matters that Rawls renders beyond the governance of a shared conception of justice. This central tension stems from the reality that many issues that Rawls would omit from a shared conception of justice are the object of political and epistemic debate, appearing in candidates' platforms and on social media. To solve this friction, governments could *encourage* epistemically good reasoning in political and apolitical structures alike by framing epistemic considerations as central to effective

reasoning, within and without politics. Of course, the government cannot regulate this beyond the political sphere; however, creating structures in the political sphere that reward good reasoning subliminally reinforces that type of reasoning as a whole. If agents practice epistemic goodness in political matters, the agent gains experience in achieving wide reflective equilibrium for any issue, even beyond the scope of a shared conception of justice. Ideally, the agent would engage in epistemically good reasoning in all decision making, not just those in regards to the shared conception of justice. While ideal applications of a community based epistemology would extend to the issues of comprehensive doctrines, this requires a fatal and impossible concession from Rawls. To this end, *any* encouragement of wide reflective equilibrium is better than a lack of reasoning.

As a result, Rawls encourages epistemically good reasoning to a certain extent, but the ideal community based epistemology addresses issues that are beyond the governance of Rawls' theory. Rawls illustrates the importance of evidence and reflection with the concept of the wide reflective equilibrium, but today's issues like climate change or vaccine hesitancy often fall outside of the shared conception of justice at which reflective equilibrium aims. These issues sit beyond the governance of wide reflective equilibrium because different people in different kinds of societies engage in conversations relating to these issues. Today's agents are beyond a public conception of justice, as echo chambers encompass people in areas with very different understandings of justice. A person in Iran or Russia can interact with Americans on Twitter, but the countries have very different political understandings. Importantly, arguments against vaccine mandates pertaining to individual rights would be less applicable to illiberal regimes. This is not to say that a country's conception of justice is the same as their citizens', but the scope of interaction is far beyond Rawls' framing. Reflective equilibrium endorses the type of

reasoning that epistemically good agents should engage in every day, but Rawls does not explicitly frame it in that way. Rawls' boundaries for reflective equilibrium could come from his caution regarding what is practicable in society. However, today's issues suggest, for the sake of a stable political order, theory should aim to form systems that encourage epistemically good reasoning in all relevant situations.¹⁹ Reestablishing wide effective equilibrium as an epistemic concept beyond Rawls and implementing it in Rawls' theory would undermine the lines Rawls draws between government and comprehensive doctrines in his theory, but it illustrates that wide reflective equilibrium itself is not problematic, only its current application in Rawls.²⁰

Many aspects of Rawls' theory show the benefits of epistemically good reasoning in political issues. Rawls' original position deals with the same core consideration as Nguyen's solution to echo chambers, the social epistemic reboot. As Nguyen suggests that agents must relinquish background beliefs to escape an echo chamber, Rawls' original position works as an application of this idea. The possibility that an agent must shed her background judgements and affiliations to justly or effectively make decisions, in Rawls' case, about how society's structure, is a moral but essentially epistemic exercise. Through reasoning and agreement, those under a veil of ignorance agree on a just political structure. This, of course, means that Rawls is aware of the benefits of certain epistemic environments encouraging agents to think deliberately about

¹⁹ This is to say that theory should encourage epistemically good reasoning to form beliefs that could impact society in a substantive way. An agent need not research her cereal choices with the same fervor she applies to her stance on abortion.

²⁰ Theorists have adopted reflective equilibrium as an epistemic method and apply it in ways beyond Rawls. This trend illustrates that Rawls' theory possesses valuable epistemic building blocks, but building them to their best potential contradicts Rawls' understanding of justice. As a result, reflective equilibrium is interpreted by some as inadequate, epistemically speaking, without unshackling it from Rawls' theory (see Kelly and McGrath (2010)).

what systems would most benefit them, but he does so from the perspective of practical benefit.²¹

Rawls suggests that a veil of ignorance is necessary because it is difficult to

specify a point of view from which a fair agreement between free and equal persons can be reached; but this point of view must be removed from and not distorted by the particular features and circumstances of the existing basic structure (15).

While Rawls endorses a more deliberative epistemic environment to solve political and social issues, he does so strictly in the form of a thought experiment. The original position clearly prioritizes justification and warrant, but its structure may undermine the augmentation of these considerations in the everyday operation of political society. In this way, the original position illustrates the benefit of community-based epistemic deliberation, but it does so with an eye to justice, not for the sake of reason or rationality. This is not to say that Rawls' approach does not achieve its end, but Rawls' political society and those who read Rawls may not glean any epistemically centered ideas from the original position. It is clear that political philosophy is meant to achieve political ends, so my imposition of epistemic considerations may seem mismatched. However, a more precise understanding of the epistemic agent within political society, one who is technically rational but epistemically flawed, can greatly benefit political inquiries.

We as critics and thinkers would benefit from an explicitly community-based epistemology that unpacks why it is difficult to achieve agreement and why that necessitates the original position, *from an epistemic point of view*. This is to say that the original position for the sake of epistemology not the sake of a good conception of justice is the goal of a community based epistemology, but the original position, as Rawls frames it, works as an exercise of epistemically good reasoning. Rawls' centering of epistemic considerations in the original

²¹ This should not be misconstrued as a critique of Rawls. This, if anything, is a critique of how we apply political philosophy and what changes would better prepare us to apply theories like Rawls'.

position would necessitate framing the thought experiment based on the idea that the original position is an epistemically good structure.²² This could operate as a simple footnote differentiating between epistemically rational traits and those issues that slip between the cracks and how the original position helps alleviate these, or it could serve as its own chapter in his work. In this way, instead of misappropriating his thought experiments, those who are influenced by Rawls' theories are more likely to heed his epistemic advice to form their own theories or to exact change in the world. Resituating Rawls in this way may erase some of his work's nuance, but it does so to the end of practicability and application.

Similarly, Nozick's understanding of the relationship between moral philosophy and political philosophy in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* illustrates the important boundaries of agency. Nozick argues that moral constraints are the basis of the boundaries of political philosophy. Prior to moral constraint is the question of agency, to which practical rationality and epistemic rationality contribute. Nozick suggests,

A theory of state of nature begins with fundamental general descriptions of morally permissible and impermissible actions, and of deeply based reasons why some persons in any society would violate these moral constraints, and goes on to describe how a state would arise from that state of nature will serve our explanatory purposes, *even if no state ever arose that way* (7).

Along with understanding what is permissible and impermissible, it must be clear what can and cannot be achieved by rational yet fallible agents beyond Nozick's Lockean understanding of free and equal actors. An understanding of moral permissibility is certainly informed by an understanding of the boundaries of rationality, as it must be the case that what an agent ought to do is something they rationally can achieve. However, the slide from general boundaries of moral permissibility to various other complicating factors threatens an agent's

²² This is more important for the sake of interpreting and applying Rawls, not as much for the agents in the original position.

ability to exercise all of her expected capabilities at once. Nozick's discussion of moral side constraints and the ability to keep sight of an agent's goals in life assumes a calculated epistemic agency that may not actually be the case (30, 49). An agent's capacity for multiple ends and their ability to make their beliefs and actions align with those ends is difficult to analyze or boil down to principles. As an additional consideration, the epistemic connections between agents and their abilities to share or change each other's life goals and beliefs also contributes to the application of these ideas. Providing an awareness within the theory of this intricate relationship between the epistemic dependence of agents, general conditions of agency, and those of moral responsibility would cover Nozick's bases in terms of the practical consequences of these steps within his theory, even if he does concede that the theory itself need not be explicitly explanatory in a world-responsive way.

Nozick accepts the flaws of agents, allowing these flaws to inform his understanding of the State and simultaneously relegating them to a private issue. While this tendency comes from the libertarian nature of the theory, it ignores the gravity of epistemic flaws in favor of a political scope. Nozick's lack of explicit epistemic considerations (in comparison to Rawls) illustrates how, without centering epistemological considerations as a prerequisite for political arguments, the theory misses aspects that come into play in everyday society. As a whole, Nozick's theory presents an argument in a principled, methodical way, comparing his arguments against Rawls' through direct counterarguments. Nozick creates clear, named differences between his theory and Rawls' theory and shows the benefits and drawbacks of each. He reconciles how historical and time-slice principles differ, and he directly addresses Rawls' theory of justice as fairness.²³

²³ This is not to say that Rawls does not adequately account for Nozick's criticism. An epistemically virtuous agent interested in political theory would also look into Rawls' *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (used in this thesis) to understand the other perspective on the debate. Their particular differences in conceptions of justice are outside the scope of this thesis.

This method of argumentation encourages epistemically good reasoning by utilizing multiple perspectives and ideas to inform the theory. However, in terms of content, Nozick fails to address the gravity of the epistemic community. Admittedly, Nozick fails to help square the issues of today's epistemic community because government-endorsed epistemic structures directly contradict the scope of his theory, as these issues would live in the private lives of individuals. As a result, Nozick's theory goes against the promise of a community-based epistemology in its content, but it exercises epistemically good reasoning in its structure and method.

Referencing the nature of the epistemic community, in any form of political theory, encourages the effective application of that theory because a community-based epistemology *is* most applicable to today's society. Nozick's understanding of an agent's nature and how that contributes to the need for government addresses an agent's epistemic nature, even if peripherally. However, Nozick and other theorists must address the epistemic community in order to ensure that their theories are applicable to an agent's epistemic nature *in the epistemic community*. Resituating epistemic considerations as a necessary good in political society, regardless of overall conception of justice, is important in alleviating tensions that undermine an agent's ability to act effectively in that society, presumably hurting their ability to act in allegiance with the chosen conception of justice.

Can Political Theory Fix Epistemic Vice?

In the cases of Rawls and Nozick, adding an epistemic awareness or disclaimer to their political theory could only help the precision of their commentary and rid them of the responsibility of non-ideal but rational agents in any critiques that arise. Implementing a community based epistemology within the theoretical framework makes these theories more

explicitly responsive to flawed nature of rationality and agency. These theories must allow agents to look to one another to help build an understanding of the world around them and create spaces in which agents are compelled to perform epistemically good reasoning in order to ensure their theories effectively work. Augmenting the needs and nature of the agent and creating a system that encourages their best performance in society would allow theorists like Rawls and Nozick to posit practicable and influential ideas. While a community based epistemology does not create perfect agents, acknowledging the naturally epistemically connected nature of agents is important to any world-responsive and tailored theory.

Part VIII: Conclusion: Augmenting Epistemic Considerations in Political Philosophy

In this paper, I argue that epistemic agents are rational but epistemically troubled. To alleviate this tension, I advocate for structural reform through a community based epistemology, making society more conducive to epistemically good reasoning. However, I argue that these changes are better suited for political theory prior to society itself as a matter of practicability. These epistemically informed political theories would influence new societies that are more epistemically conscious. Implementing changes in this way encourages prioritizing epistemic concerns in the pursuit of effective political theory and in its application.

However, this thesis presents a central puzzle: The agent's issues begin with other agents, but my proposed solution is to epistemically ally with other agents. I argue that because agents simply *are* epistemically dependent, the solution to epistemic problems must also include collaboration and dependency. The difference between the state where agents rely on each other in epistemically bad ways and the society where a community based epistemology brings breakthroughs and effective debate lies in the social structures in which these conversations occur. While society can hold people accountable for their beliefs, it is also the case that society

should be structured to encourage accurate or well informed beliefs. Agents today face a great challenge. They are expected to share their voice on the internet and profess “good” opinions, but do so while navigating a landscape of information that begets patently bad reasoning. At the core of this issue is a veil of individualism, finding that people are reasonable enough to come to their own conclusions. However, it is clear that people are epistemically connected. Reconciling these factors sits at the core of saving agents from their weakness, or else, making them aware of how to navigate the world around them in a way that betters society as a whole. Solving these issues involves creating epistemic spaces that account for the agent as they are, not forcing the agent to align with an arbitrary structure to the detriment of society as a whole. I do not advance the precise structure of these epistemic spaces because the epistemic aspects of these structures do not dictate the structure as a whole. In this way, epistemic virtue within social structures should be ubiquitous and relevant to all liberal societies containing rational agents.

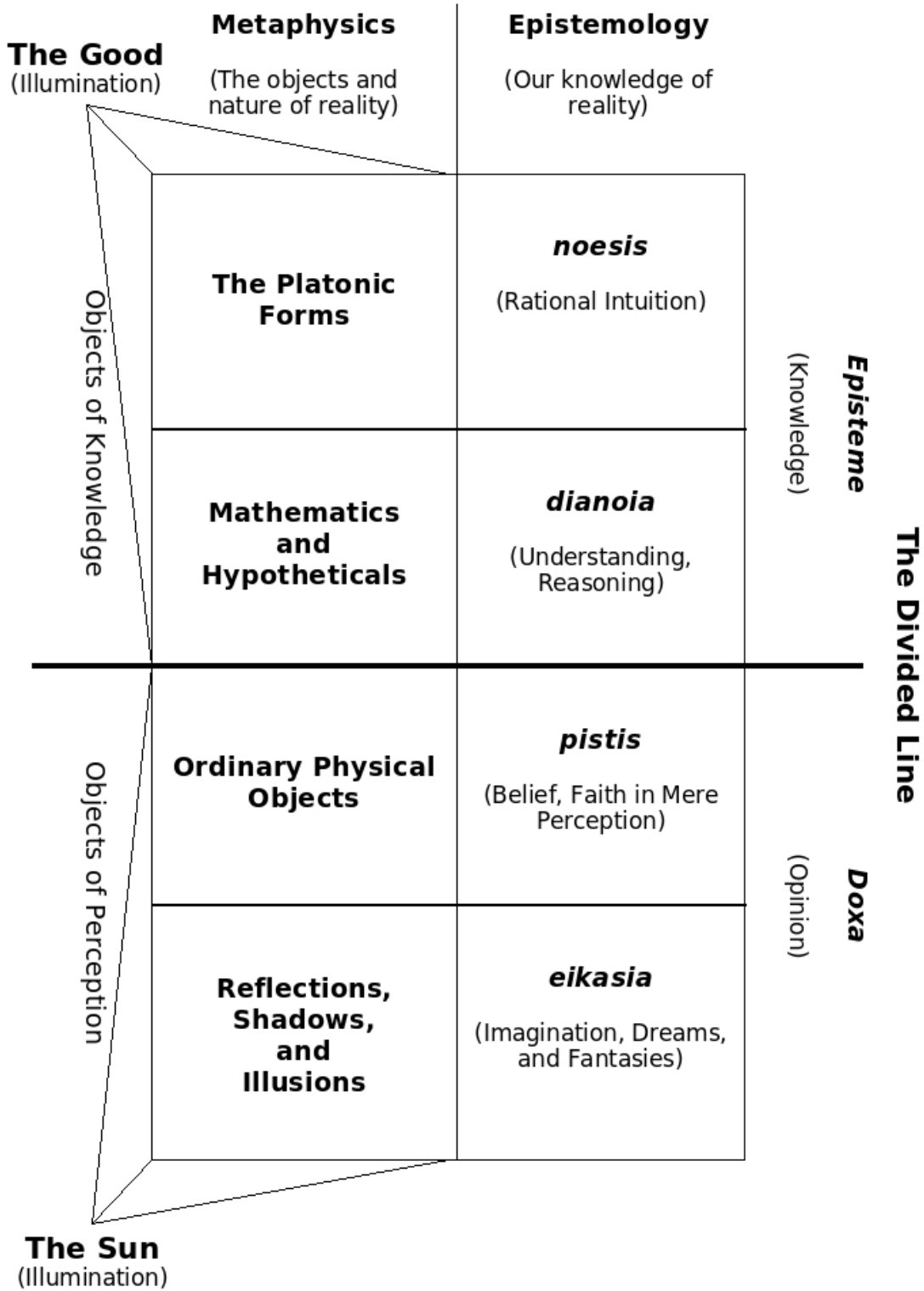
It could be the case that these problems are inescapable. Non-ideal epistemology presents issues and paradoxes in agents that may be too intricate to resolve. The future of social interaction and politics, however, relies on people’s ability to form accurate beliefs about the world around them. In a “post-fact” society, heightened epistemic awareness could save the system from spiraling into untethered relativism. If we are to achieve any reform, society and theory must acknowledge the nuance and impact of epistemic considerations. An explicit awareness of epistemic weakness allows agents and society at-large to understand where we go wrong. We may not be able to stop the wave of disinformation and poor reasoning, but the first steps to fighting the broader epistemic devolution are acknowledging that it exists and searching for its causes and its impacts. The power of today’s epistemic community, for good *and* bad, suggests that we are best suited to combat these issues and search for answers together.

Appendix A

Definitions (In order of appearance)

Epistemology	The philosophy of knowledge and understanding. Within this thesis' context, the study of belief, argumentation, and reason.
Epistemic Rationality	A judgment of thought, as in, an agent can think and form beliefs in the way they ought in relation to reason.
Practical Rationality	A judgment of action, as in, an agent can act in the way they ought in relation to reason.
Community Based Epistemology	An understanding of belief that recognizes and centers the role of the community in influencing belief.
Individualistic Epistemology	An understanding of belief that centers the individual and their ownership of justification.
Epistemic Dependence	People rely on one another or defer to one another when forming beliefs and judging evidence (Hardwig 1985).
Expert-Layman Distinction	People are justified in deferring to other agents that they see as experts in a field for information or evidence on that topic (Hardwig 1985).
Doxastic Incontinence	An agent believes her belief is unwarranted but holds it anyway (Heil 1984).
Non-Akrasia Constraint	An agent can not have high confidence in P and high confidence in the idea that her evidence does not support P (Horowitz 2014).
Level-Splitting	Misleading higher-order evidence can cause confidence in <i>P</i> and <i>my evidence does not support P</i> (Tiozzo 2019).
Epistemic Circularity	A person believes in the merit of X because of information that X supplied to her regarding X's merit (Bergmann 2004).
Epistemic Bubble	An environment where evidence is excluded or omitted from reasoning (Nguyen 2020).
Echo Chamber	An environment is isolated from other structures and people within it are made to believe in their unique merit and the inadequacy of the outside world through deliberate censorship (Nguyen 2020).
Epistemic Virtue/Goodness	A characteristic of an agent who goes beyond what is rationally required of her to effectively reason through the world around her.
Epistemic Badness	A characteristic of an agent who engages in poor epistemic reasoning.
Reasonable Pluralism	A variety of perspectives and opinions should be accepted and respected in society (Rawls 2001).

Appendix B



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