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‘We’re Flying the Plane While We’re Building It’: Epistemic Humility and Non-Knowledge in Political Decision-Making on COVID-19

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Abstract

During the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, politicians and public authorities have struggled with how to manage widespread ignorance and insecurity regarding the virus. Non-knowing has been frequently recognized as a negative condition in politics but it can lead to a new kind of epistemic attitude in decision-making which is called here ‘epistemic humility’.

When COVID-19 pandemic threatened people’s health and security, most world politicians and policy-makers looked for support for their decisions in conversations with scientific advisors to receive relevant knowledge and assessments of the situation. Paradoxically, instead of knowledge, experts can only provide information on risks, probabilities and uncertainties on COVID-19. Whereas some experts point to ‘unknown unknowns’ and to the enduring ‘unknowability’ of complex causal interconnections, others assume that the relevant gaps in knowledge are specifiable and can be overcome within manageable time scales.

Policy-makers face difficult choices, including whose advice they should follow when experts have opposing views on the virus. The pluralization of knowledge implies a weakening of its ability to command. This is why political decisions about actions required to save lives do not only depend on scientific knowledge but on justified, rational, democratic and legitimate handling of ignorance.

A growing number of political scientists, sociologists and economists have criticised rational theories and suggested that the nexus of non-knowledge and power should be seen as constitutive for political decision-making (e.g. Innerarity 2013). Non-knowledge cannot be reduced to some lack of knowledge that could be solved by looking harder at the facts or processes of conjecture and refutation. Particularly amidst natural disasters, accidents and pandemics, making decisions under ignorance requires new forms of justification, rationality, legitimation and observation of consequences so that society can function effectively.

Under the pressure of the COVID-19 pandemic, politicians have been in the position to make fast but prudent decisions to protect public health without knowing whether or not their security measures are oversized or insufficient. How much non-knowledge can decision-makers afford to have in assessing security without unleashing uncontrollable threats? How does the government take responsibility for decisions that have to be made in a state of uncertainty and that can have fatal consequences?

Political decision-makers fall easily into inaction when pressures boil over due to lack of (and inaccurate) knowledge, personal stress, administrative chaos, and controversies from parliamentary opposition and the media. Depending on the duration of the crisis, the situation creates opportunities for challenging and changing the status quo. Both knowledge and non-knowledge are used not only in implementing political decisions and justifying them

in public, but also for creating room for national and international manoeuvres needed to take or stay in power.

Certainly, attempts to govern by non-knowing are always in danger when undermining the role of knowledge as the foundation of political decisions. Recent studies on epistemologies of ignorance have moved beyond the realm of the traditional epistemic approaches, addressing that ignorance could be understood as a positive social enactment. The notion of non-knowledge does not refer to mere absence of knowledge but a transition phase or a liminal space in which one has to re-evaluate one's own perceptions.

By breaking the normal rhythm and generating a dense presence, the COVID-19 pandemic has formed a special kind of time matrix in politics that is leveraged by a flood of news and intensified social media activity. In this view, speed and temporal thickness breed a 'a regime of futurity' that makes all policy decisions urgent within the incessant production of events. The relationship between temporality/futurity, non-knowledge and power is something that has been given relatively little attention in social epistemology.

The Temporality of Non-Knowing in Decision-Making

The temporality of non-knowing affects substantially the rhythms in which political decisions have been made in managing the spread of COVID-19. By following Beck and Wehling's (2012) formulation, the fundamental dimensions of non-knowledge and the potentials of knowing can include epistemic states, such as, 'not-yet-known' (but very likely to be known later), 'inability-to-know' (due to known obstacles, it is not possible to know now but maybe later) or 'inability-ever-to-know' (due to known obstacles, it cannot be known). In the first case, health authorities and scientists can estimate what is not-yet-known about the virus but very likely to be known later. In the second case, experts can show reasons why they are unable to know (inability-to-know) some aspects that can possibly become known later. In the third case, due to the complexity of its social, political and economic consequences, the fundamental societal changes the virus will cause can remain largely unknown.

Politicians' decision-making follows the rhythm of knowledge production in which phases of 'known', 'partly-known', 'not-yet-known', 'will-be-known', 'unable-to-know' and 'unable-ever-to-know' vary in the manner that assessments of risks and uncertainties change all the time. This implies that sometimes decisions must precede what is not-yet-known, but if the assumptions prove to be wrong, the decisions must be reversed or corrected afterwards. Due to the slow pace of legislative and administrative work, there are difficulties in coordinating political decisions with the daily updated information produced by the pandemic, so the epistemic constellation forms a complex system that needs constant reassessment of previous perceptions and reconsideration of decisions.

Flying and Building the Plane

This continuous re-evaluation and decision-making can be captured by a well-known educational metaphor that 'the plane must be built and flied at the same time'. This refers to the classical idea of 'learning from mistakes', in which learning about what does not function

may hasten understanding of why the correct procedures are appropriate. Of course, this can also lead to a fatal mistake that causes the whole plane crashes.

In politics, events that are considered as mistakes or errors attract far more attention than does governance without doubts. Errors tend to dominate political conversation as ‘scandals’ and ‘fiascos’, with searches for people who are blamed for the disastrous outcomes. However, in a crisis, urgent decisions cannot be left unmade despite the possibility of errors.

It is inevitable that, after the crisis is over, many controversial and divergent interpretations will be made concerning what politicians and policymakers in the given situation could or should have known. Could the massive consequences of the pandemic have been avoided by testing people for the virus and putting them in personal quarantine earlier? Could a better resourced public health care sector have been more prepared for the pandemic?

The virus includes plenty of unpredictable dimensions, however, the appearance of a new pandemic has been predicted for years by WHO and virologists over the world. The degrees of the intentionality of non-knowing regarding the virus become relevant when the actions of policymakers in different countries will be evaluated more carefully in the future. Intentional or wilful non-knowing refers to the situation when ignorance is one’s own result, for instance, due to a lack of interest or denying or concealing the situation. If information about the virus has been intentionally concealed in some countries, inability to manage with the crisis can be caused by wilful non-knowledge.

Epistemic Humility

Crisis, political leadership and non-knowledge are closely intertwined, particularly during crisis episodes when the circle of decision-makers tightens, and leaders are expected to take the initiative. It is important to remember that part of the legitimacy of political decision-making stems from policymakers’ promises to act rationally despite limited information.

Applying here Sheila Jasanoff’s (2007) notion of ‘technologies of humility’, politicians need to acknowledge the partiality of scientific knowledge: knowledge does not provide definitive solutions to value-driven politics, thus, policymakers always act under irredeemable uncertainty. The idea of epistemic humility denotes that policy makers acknowledge the limits of human knowledge in the manner that unknown, uncertain, ambiguous and uncontrollable dimensions are accepted as relevant parts of consideration (see Parviainen and Lahikainen 2019). This implies that relying too much on scientific facts can lead to the requirement of overconfidence with the consequence that decision-making becomes paralysed. Overconfidence is considered to be a form of cognitive bias in the sense that it can obstruct people from recognizing intuition, identifying dangers or seeing their own weaknesses and mistakes.

On the other hand, with the opposite of overconfidence—ignoring scientific knowledge and experts' advice in decision making—politicians can be in a similarly dangerous trap where they make overreactions and risky decisions. This is frequently called the 'Dunning-Kruger Effect', meaning that politicians are unaware of what they do not know and could make highly risky decisions as a result. The Dunning-Kruger effect happens when someone is ignorant of their own ignorance, but furthermore, is overconfident in their knowledge or abilities.

The interpretation of epistemic humility is characterised as the capacity to lead people through intellectual confusion and uncertainty so as to develop their resilience in terms of handling insecurity and avoiding overconfidence. Shared small-group leadership with low hierarchy and the ability to think in groups are found to be more functional in crisis management decision-making than are strong hierarchies and autocratic leadership. Epistemic humility as a decision-making strategy stresses that decisions are multi-spherical and multi-directional with several possible consequences. Policy actors recognise that they are not only confronted with diverging interpretations of a policy problem, but also uncertain about the consequences of decisions. When decision-making in crisis situations is characterized by uncertainty, ambiguity, complexity and urgency, it also requires the ability to be sensitive to the nonlinearity of the consequences.

There is not necessarily a direct cause-and-effect relationship between variables; instead, there could be many different causes that might bring up unexpected situations. Since epistemic agents cannot be sure of the outcome of a decision, the complexity of the context as well as the cognitive limits of the actors themselves prevent them from calculating the associated risks and probabilities. Though policy-makers have limited information, limited available time for decision-making and the whole process is hastened, timely consideration can develop proper actions and activities to respond to the problem. It is, therefore, of extreme importance not to overlook what is not-yet-known and disregard or underestimate inability-to-know, although we would not have solutions for the crisis.

In this epistemic framework, rather than looking for objective, 'hard' facts and pushing back ignorance, policymakers need to consider their non-knowledge as an essential part of political decisions. Instead of considering uncertain knowledge here as the merely plausible, non-scientific forms of knowledge, non-knowing as an imperfect phenomenon should be seen as a relevant resource in political decision-making.

This implies that non-knowing cannot be eliminated by acquiring knowledge; rather, politicians and authorities need to learn to manage their non-knowledge in handling the crisis. Instead of focusing on controversies over ignorance and knowledge, I argue that conjecture and speculation are acceptable in admitting certain degrees of uncertainty and are, therefore, relegated to the realm of non-knowledge. Policymakers need to be increasingly aware of their non-knowledge by learning to manage its various forms: doubt, probability, risk and uncertainty. Non-knowing should not be denied but seen as a resource in political decision-making.

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