Echo Chambers and Crisis Epistemology: A Reply to Santos

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Belief polarization, misinformation, and distrust in scientific expertise are on the rise in democracies across the globe. These worrying trends have been accompanied by some new, or at least newly appropriated, phrases to describe them. The spread of misinformation is blamed on “fake news”, skepticism about science is a matter of “post-truth politics”, and deepening political divides are due to rampant “echo chambers”. An unofficial sub-discipline has emerged within social epistemology to address the mounting crisis, and some commentators subject these colorful terms to philosophical scrutiny (see, e.g., McIntyre 2018; Habgood-Coote 2019, Nguyen 2020). Three closely related questions might be asked:

1. In what sense are the problems associated with these terms new?
2. Is the new terminology just a politically motivated rebranding of old concerns?
3. Is the terminology politically or morally useful?

While these questions don’t explicitly frame Breno Santos’s recent paper, “Echo Chambers, Ignorance and Domination”, it implicitly engages each of them in relation to echo chambers. Santos divides the paper into two halves. In the first, Santos argues that the echo chamber problem is closely related to structural ignorance, where ignorance is primarily due to membership in a social group rather than any individual deficit. In the second, Santos argues that echo chambers are usefully described as playing a role in hermeneutical domination, where a political majority imposes their interpretation of the world by discrediting potential detractors.

Before addressing these claims, some background on echo chambers will be useful. We often use “echo chamber” to describe situations where contrary views are simply left out, but C. Thi Nguyen has recently argued that the phrase is better defined in terms of out-group distrust (2020). While fellow echo chamber members are assigned high credibility, outsiders are, even if they are frequently heard, regarded with greater suspicion. This uneven distribution of credibility may lead to serious problems when an echo chamber forms around false beliefs. The assignment of low credibility to outsiders will effectively preempt any external criticism which might serve as a basis for correction (see Begby 2020).

This problem also leads to one of the most interesting features of echo chambers. Once you accept the uneven distribution of credibility, the beliefs characteristic of the echo chamber will appear perfectly reasonable from the inside. After all, everyone agrees with you, which is to say, everyone worth paying any mind. The detractors are biased, misinformed, if not deluded, deranged, or downright evil. Their claims are certainty not worth taking seriously. That’s not to say that individual members won’t also exhibit epistemic vice but that the problem is largely a function of the social network as a whole.

Another way of describing such collective failings is in terms of “structural”, as opposed to individual, deficiencies. This connection allows for the comparison with “structural
ignorance”, which Santos uses as a blanket term for highlighting the social aspects of “white ignorance” (Mills 2007), “willful hermeneutical ignorance (Pohlhaus 2012), and “active ignorance” (Medina 2013). Charles Mills offers the illustrative example of Amasa Delano, the protagonist of Melville’s *Benito Cereno*, who boards a slave ship and witnesses:

… all around him the evidence for black insurrection. …But so unthinkable is the idea that the inferior blacks could have accomplished such a thing that Delano searches for every possible alternative explanation for the seemingly strange behavior of the imprisoned whites, no matter how farfetched. (Mills 2007, 19).

One needn’t presume any particular epistemic vice on the character’s part to explain his cognitive failing. His inability to know is generated and sustained through membership in the social group to which he belongs. This is, moreover, a social group which preserves its understanding of racial differences by actively discrediting any minority voices which might rise to challenge that understanding.

In cases like these, ignorance is preserved through the same kind of differential credibility assignment we find in echo chambers. Santos claims that an account of echo chambers should “make use of the notion of [structural] ignorance” (2020, 1), that we cannot “think of echo chambers separately” (2020, 3) from such ignorance, and that echo chambers “involve practices of ignorance” (2020, 5), but Santos doesn’t spell out the connection more precisely or offer a concise definition of structural ignorance which might help clarify the matter. It is also unclear whether Santos intends “structural ignorance” to be interchangeable with “active ignorance” (the latter expression dominates Santos’s discussion).

The claim that we cannot think of echo chambers without thinking of structural ignorance suggests a relationship of conceptual dependence. It would seem then that structural ignorance is, according to Santos, ignorance which emerges through social practices involving uneven credibility distributions to insiders and outsiders. If this is this the correct way to understand structural ignorance, then there is a clear conceptual overlap. Given, however, that privilege and oppression are such salient features of examples from the literature on ignorance under discussion, one might worry that Santos only secures this conceptual dependence through a bit of conceptual gerrymandering. Why not instead define structural ignorance as ignorance resulting from an uneven distribution of credibility where the latter is understood specifically as a practice of domination? This seems to better describe the interests of commentators like Mills, Medina and Pohlhaus. It’s true that one of the examples Santos discusses, climate change denial, doesn’t clearly involve privilege or dominance on the part of the echo chamber, but then it’s not obvious that this example should be grouped with the other examples provided.

Leaving these relatively minor concerns aside, we can at least say that there is strong family resemblance between echo chambers and structural ignorance. Santos draws this connection to emphasize the social dimensions of echo chambers and lead “us to think more carefully on why some echo chambers pose a danger to the healthy functioning of our epistemic
commons” (2020, 7). I agree that some fruitful insights might be drawn from the comparison, but it’s not clear what role it plays in Santos’s project specifically. It’s not as though Nguyen fails emphasize the social dimensions of echo chambers himself, and Santos doesn’t use the comparison to address any specific worry he has with Nguyen’s treatment of those social aspects either. This is unfortunate since there are a number of pressing questions one might ask, and some of them still linger over Santos’s presentation. One question concerns the relationship between echo chambers and epistemic vice. In his account of echo chambers, Nguyen describes epistemic vice as a property of the social network itself, stating that “epistemic vice is a feature of the collective intelligence, rather than of the individual” (2020, 156). At the very least, claims Nguyen, “echo chambers are local background conditions that turn generally good epistemic practices into locally unreliable ones” (2020, 156).

In contrast, Santos treats epistemic vice as a property of individuals. The social element consists in the fact that these problematic features are created and maintained through the activities of the group. Santos doesn’t note this difference in emphasis, but it brings up some interesting questions. In the background is the possibility discussed at the outset. When you start out, so to speak, in a bad echo chamber, you may contribute to the spread of false beliefs even if you are trying your reasonable best to get at the truth. Call this the “bad start” problem. Although Santos recognizes the importance of this possibility and uses it to emphasize how echo chambers are a structural problem, it doesn’t sit comfortably with the notion that structural ignorance and, by extension, echo chambers are always a matter of epistemically vicious behavior on the part of individuals. At the same time, there must be something right about Santos’s claim. Simply put, the problem that interests both Nguyen and Santos is distrust, and distrust is a property of individual members of the echo chamber. If distrust leads to bad epistemic effects, that must be where the epistemic vice lies. So, what’s going on here?

To clarify matters, it might be useful to think more about epistemic vice. Heather Battaly distinguishes three distinct notions (see Battaly 2014, 2019). A property counts as an effects vice when it reliably leads to bad epistemic effects, for example, the production of more false beliefs than true beliefs. On first blush, this concept may allow us to make sense of both Nguyen and Santos’s way of describing the relationship between echo chambers and vice. The bad epistemic effects are the product of individuals interacting with each other and their broader environment. It is the system as a whole that ultimately explains the result, and so it seems natural to describe either the system as a whole or any salient contributor to the system in terms of epistemic vice. On the face of it, this doesn’t do much to illuminate the bad start problem (but I will return to this issue below).

An accountable vice, on the other hand, is an acquired, blameworthy, and intrinsically bad epistemic property of an agent. This concept fits occasions where we would focus on features of the individual him or herself in explaining bad epistemic effects. Neither Nguyen nor Santos give us any reason to doubt that accountable vice plays a role in problematic echo chambers, but the bad start problem gives us reason to think that this can’t be the whole story. A personalist vice, finally, is a person-level and intrinsically bad epistemic property of an
agent, but such characteristics are not acquired through one’s own efforts nor is the individual epistemically blameworthy for possessing them. Battaly introduces this concept precisely to address what I’ve been calling “bad start problems”:

Consider children raised by the Hitler Jugend or by ISIS. They are indoctrinated to behave in ways that closed-minded people behave—to ignore, dismiss, and suppress alternative ideas. But, importantly, they also acquire the epistemic motivations and value-commitments of closed-minded people. Their environments indoctrinate them to care about and value stability, obedience, and conformity in their thinking, and to judge open-minded thought as weak and dangerous. They emerge with integrated dispositions of action, motivation, and value: they ignore, dismiss, and suppress alternative ideas and do so because of the epistemic motivations and value-commitments they have acquired. They are not conflicted, nor are they “just going through the motions”; rather, they are “true believers” who are executing their evaluative plans. Notice that the Jugend graduate’s closed-mindedness is personal—it expresses his epistemic character and is grounded in his epistemic values and motives. His epistemic values and motives are also intrinsically bad. Further, crucially, he isn’t responsible for becoming closed-minded—he isn’t blameworthy in the standard voluntarist sense where blame requires control (Battaly 2019, 121).

This passage raises another issue and a tantalizing theoretical possibility. Both Nguyen and Santos focus on distrust, but there is nothing epistemically vicious about distrust in itself (in any sense of epistemic vice). If I have good evidence that my friend is a compulsive liar, then it may be epistemically responsible for me to distrust him. The passage above suggests that echo chambers should instead be defined in terms of epistemically vicious closed-mindedness and minimally in a personalist sense. I add the qualification “minimally” to allow that accountable forms of vice may play a role in echo chambers as well. A couple of interesting questions might be pursued from here.

As I just noted, the problem with focusing on distrust is that distrust doesn’t imply epistemic vice, but it is not obvious that closed-mindedness is always epistemically vicious either (consider, for a complimentary example to the above, closed-mindedness against Nazi ideology). Any proposal along these lines would therefore have to clarify the relevantly vicious sense of closed-mindedness at play (see, e.g., Battaly 2018; Fantl 2018). Another interesting question to pursue is the extent to which focusing on structural problems might undermine traditional ways of thinking about epistemic accountability. Such a project might bring up issues related to causal salience and the social embeddedness of cognition. Can you really separate individual and social contributions in such a way that justifies a clear attribution of blame to the individual? Fighting against the prospect of a “no” answer is a reluctance to let people of the hook for their epistemically pernicious behavior.

One potential resource for thinking through this danger is work on hard incompatibilism about free will and other work which helps us think through the moral and pragmatic value
of blame. In the background are practical questions about whether and under what circumstances corrective interventions to problematic echo chambers should focus on individuals rather than social structures. In this connection, one may want to argue that effects vice is the most important concept for characterizing echo chambers at the end of the day. Consider liking a false news story that a friend shared on Facebook (see Rini 2017). This may, in a small but nevertheless meaningful way, contribute to bad epistemic effects. But it doesn’t seem like closed-mindedness or any personalist vice is required on the part of the casual Facebook user for these problematic effects to take place.

The bad start problem, finally, can be accommodated simply by noting that such individuals don’t exhibit accountable vice, even if they do contribute to effects vice. One final caveat before moving on. The above discussion assumes that echo chambers should be defined as epistemically bad, but it’s not obvious that echo chambers should be defined this way (see Elzinga 2020). Why can’t there be good echo chambers or ones that systematically keep out false beliefs? Most discussions focus on the bad effects of echo chambers, but that doesn’t in itself imply that all echo chambers are bad. Santos makes a similar point in a footnote (see 2020, fn. 1).

In any case, the connection Santos draws between echo chambers and structural ignorance does prepare the reader for his discussion of hermeneutical domination. Here’s Santos’s main point. When one echo chamber has greater political power over another, the uneven distribution of credibility will further reinforce the dominance of the majority perspective. Any external criticism will be preemptively undermined. Santos contrasts this kind of deeply problematic echo chamber with one that forms around climate change denial:

...although we can characterize the bolsonarista echo chamber in this way by drawing on the same elements we used to present the climate change deniers, I believe there are important differences in the way these social epistemic structures manifest themselves in actuality. The bolsonarista echo chamber works not only by undermining the epistemic credentials of left-wing people... But it does that by imposing, as a literal or political majority, a monopoly on the ways we should see activism for gender and sexual rights in the country. In the ‘gender ideology case’, it imposes collective understandings on the matter, sometimes by the force of the law (Santos 2020, 8-9).

The contrast is useful, but this passage also reconfirms that Santos doesn’t think of structural ignorance as necessarily a product and further tool of domination. It would be helpful, therefore, if Santos could provide a concise definition of structural ignorance and address the fact that many of the examples he cites while describing such ignorance involve social domination. Without clarification on this score, the above contrast seems somewhat contrived.

Santos has, nevertheless, arrived at a useful point. By explicitly connecting echo chambers with practices of hermeneutical domination, Santos helps reveal what many of us find most
worrisome about echo chambers. In the form of a politically dominant majority, they seem pose an inexorable threat to our collective ability to know the world. What can we do about it? In my own contribution to crisis epistemology, I argue that what makes problematic echo chambers challenging is collaborative resistance to outsider intervention and insider defection (Elzinga 2020).

In response to outsider criticism, members of the echo chamber don’t statically rely on their previously inculcated distrust to rebuff the other side. They instead collaboratively develop a counter-response, in the form of arguments, alternative narratives, memes, and labels like “SJW” which implicitly undermine credibility, and thereby reinforce both their collective beliefs and the unequal distribution of trust. On the other hand, any potential for change from within the echo chamber will face the problem of collaborative resistance to insider defection. In other words, the deviant behavior of fellow echo chamber members will be met with internal sanctions, which gain weight not only because insiders are assigned high credibility but also because fellow echo chambers are often sources of non-epistemic goods (friendship, family, and so on). It may be interesting to develop an account of echo chambers focusing on these phenomena in relation to my earlier suggestion about closed-mindedness, but for now my focus is on solutions. In light of these problems, I argued that corrective interventions will have to originate from “first-movers” within the echo chamber who, due to their high status, are relatively immune to internal sanctions (see, also, Bicchieri 2016). The obvious problem with this proposal is that high-status members often have the least reason to change. The prospects look grim. Santos does not address solutions in his paper, but it might be useful to explore whether the particular concerns Santos raises reveal any additional insights about how to address these problems and the form solutions in general must take.

References


