Towards an Institutional Account on Epistemic Humility and Arrogance

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Our article (Parviainen, Koski, and Torkkola 2021) has sparked debate about epistemic humility in a crisis when political decision-making requires evidence-based knowledge but scientific experts have no answers. Alena Bleicher's response (Bleicher 2021), published in the *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* (SERRC), is an insightful opening that maps out the terrain of non-knowing in political decision-making.

In her article, Bleicher emphasises four points that she believes need to be further developed when decisions being made in the face of unavoidable ignorance must be justified and legitimised. These points are:

• Dynamics of non-knowledge—intentionality and politicisation;

• Epistemic humility between overconfidence and epistemic arrogance—a field of tension;

• Scope of epistemic humility—individual attitudes, strategies of collective decision- making, or both?; and

• 'Back stage', 'front stage'—where non-knowledge can, must be, and is acknowledged.

Bleicher approaches the issue from a broader perspective than we have been able to in a single research article, and it is very encouraging to continue the discussion while heading towards a more comprehensive understanding of epistemic humility and arrogance. We completely agree that developing an understanding of epistemic humility benefits from a comparison between humility and arrogance. Like some other scholars, we have previously made such a comparison (e.g. Koski, Parviainen, and Lahikainen 2020; Lynch 2018, 2019). In this paper, we concentrate on further elaborating on the political dynamics of non-knowing and how to resolve the individualistic trap we seem to have fallen into.

The Dynamics of Non-Knowledge In Politics

We have approached political decision-making as a form of contesting action (Palonen 2006). That is, political decisions made by cabinet ministers or other authorities and the arguments justifying them can become constantly questioned through active provocation and politicisation from, for example, the parliamentary opposition, national and international expert organisations, various interest groups, or individual activists and experts. Political decision-making is public action that separates it from decision-making within private organisations. From the perspective of cognitive and behavioural decision-making, the typical theoretical understanding of political decision-making is that politicians are always at least partly concerned about their political future, which is one of the premises that affects knowledge processing (Mintz 2003; Ye 2007).

The dynamics of politics is, in this sense, epistemologically sensitive because issues of power influence how knowns and unknowns are addressed. Both knowledge and non-knowledge

are used not only in implementing political decisions and justifying them, but also for creating room for manoeuvres needed to take or stay in power. Bleicher's (2021, 58) comment that we were unable to integrate the above political dynamics into the temporal taxonomy of non-knowing, where different actors and disputes participate in processing the known, party-known, not-yet-known, will-be-known, unable-to-be-known, and unable-ever-to-be-known, is well justified. In this sense, our temporal taxonomy is not yet politically dynamic enough. However, this kind of analysis can only be made in a proper empirical case study that digs deeply into managing the pandemic crisis stage by stage.

Because political decision-making is public action, we suggest that the front- and backstage aspects are inseparable from understanding the dynamics of non-knowledge in politics and should always be taken into an account when considering epistemic humility and arrogance in political decision-making. Addressing points of non-knowing or ignoring them in public have both been used as a means of politicisation, which often takes place in traditional media or in social media. Bleicher (2021, 57) points out that the phenomenon of blaming in politics hints at the constitutive role that ignorance plays in society. We assume that this is not necessarily a matter of ignorance, but part of common political deliberation in which politicians rhetorically utilise available information in accordance with their own purposes. In studies of political communication, it has been shown that the Western media has become scandal driven, and we have reason to believe that media also start blame games to advance their own interests (Gleason 1990; Schudson 2004). Naturally, public blame games can lead to exposing an actual offence against the state or wrongdoing in office by politicians or authorities where the temporality of non-knowing can also become a legal premise.

Epistemic Humility and Arrogance: An Institutional Approach

As Bleicher (2021, 56) argues, the concept of epistemic humility has been related to the core issues of ignorance studies: What kinds of attitudes are formed when in the condition of non-knowing? In our approach, epistemic humility is understood as a proactive attitude that allows individuals and collectives to reflectively deal with epistemic disagreement and to be open to alternative views on contested subjects. It is therefore not surprising that the pandemic has spawned many new studies in which epistemic humility has been seen as a solution used to handle a tense situation (Mazzocchi 2021; Valles 2021).

These discussions on epistemic humility have addressed the basis for delineating the figure of the virtuous expert as one who is able to integrate competence with a proper epistemic stance. A striking feature of these approaches is that epistemic humility tends to be discussed as characteristic virtues or epistemic attitudes of individuals (Ho 2011; Kidd 2016). In Ho's (2011) account, epistemic humility 'means a commitment to make a realistic assessment of what one knows and does not know, and to restrict one's confidence and claims to knowledge only to what one actually knows about his/her specialized domain' (117).

In our approach to epistemic humility, we tried to avoid an individualistic trap; however, perhaps we were not able to sufficiently justify our argumentation because Bleicher points out that we refer primarily to an epistemic attitude that underlies individuals' decision-making in crisis situations. Attributing epistemic humility to individuals does very little work since there is evidence that individual characterisations do not predict action (Schwab 2012, 30). In this regard, Bleicher raises several relevant questions, such as: What are the

connections between individual attitudes and collective decision-making strategies that are characterised as epistemic humility? Can individual epistemic humility influence collective decision-making that is not based on epistemic humility? She introduces some principal elements that could reveal the structural conditions facilitating decision-making based on an open acknowledgement of non-knowledge. This discussion is highly valuable to highlighting relevant research and clarifying our argument about how epistemic humility was justified and legitimised facing unavoidable ignorance.

However, we would like to extend the discussion of structural and social conditions further to clarify institutional aspects behind epistemic humility and arrogance. This is motivated by our observation that the epistemic concept of humility has become increasingly applicable in a variety of expert situations without any societal framework. Based on our observations of governmental decision-making and political discussion in Finland and in some other countries over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, we propose other relational conditions that presumably facilitate the adoption of epistemic humility in crisis situations. Thus, we suggest that epistemic humility is constituted by social and legal institutions, and is not reducible to individual or even collective features. Stressing here the institutional perspective, the role of social and legal structures should be considered more carefully when analysing epistemic resources in responding to crises.

The Constitutional and Institutional Basis Conditioning Humility or Arrogance

We assume that both the legal and institutional bases of a regime influence the dynamics of political decision-making and open different epistemic options for powerholders. Two of the central issues are whether a political system is democratic or autocratic, and how strong the basic decision-making, administrative, and, for example, healthcare institutions are in general. Strong institutions have been found to be a prerequisite for rapid decision-making on restrictive measures in different countries (Aksoy et al. 2020).

Multidisciplinary expert groups from key institutions secured background support for policy decisions in Finland during the first wave of the pandemic. They provided an opportunity for a momentary state of ignorance on the part of experts and politicians by keeping the basic functions of society running so that the situation did not fall into chaos. During the third and fourth waves of the pandemic, Finnish authorities were accused of holding too much power and being too rigid in easing the restrictions. There is an interesting discussion of a self-inflicted processual ignorance in private organisations (Knudsen 2011; Schaefer 2019; Essén et al. 2021) that probably has repercussions for public organisations. Should this form of ignorance be understood as a kind of epistemic arrogance, and is this kind of habitual ignoring found also in public administrations?

Principles of Good Governance Advancing Humility

Epistemic humility requires ensuring that all the measures taken in a state of 'ignorance' and insecurity are thoroughly investigated in the future. Such a promise of a 'trial' to citizens provides politicians with a mandate from citizens and the opposition for their political actions. This is consistent also with principles of good governance that likewise require

decision-makers to justify their choices by promising the later evaluation of exactly what was done, at what stage, and of what information and knowledge were available in a particular moment. The Emergency Powers Act in Finland contains a division of labour between political decision-making institutions and, implicitly, a model for crisis management. The prime minister appeals to good governance and learning by errors by saying that she is acting to be even better prepared for the next epidemic that will emerge at some point in the future. Proactive politicisation that openly acknowledges the possibility of failure expands its normally limited political playground by providing opportunities to correct wrong decisions without slipping into vicious blame games with the media and the opposition.

The Degree of Consensus on the Value Basis in Society

In our article, one of our main arguments was that pandemic policy cannot be evidence-based due to a lack of relevant scientific knowledge of the virus, especially in the early stages of the crisis. By 'evidence-informed policy' we mean the decision-making of politicians, authorities, and officials who make use of scientific knowledge and research (Cairney 2016; Canali and Jukola 2020; Sequeiros and Hokkanen 2020). We assumed that the government's previous commitment to evidence-informed policymaking provided opportunities to assess the extent to which they could rely on expert advice and how they should resolve conflicting explanations of the situation. Politicians in collaboration with officials had the competence to make their own interpretation of the views expressed by scientific experts. However, values precede political decisions and cannot be justified on the basis of knowledge and research evidence alone. When uncertainty increases, as in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, so does the role of values in political decision-making. Pielke (2007, 22) argues that scientific experts can recommend action most conveniently when there is a clear common view of value choices and when there is little uncertainty about the effectiveness of the measures in relation to the values. Government's media performances as a 'common front' created the impression that the Finnish government in the spring of 2020 shared a similar set of values; as a result, the government was also able to acknowledge its own uncertainty in facing the crisis.

Mobilising Citizens Through Epistemic Humility or Arrogance

The presence of a strong civil society has been considered key in democracies in terms of fostering the participation of citizens, enhancing cohesion, and enabling informed decision-making by government. On the 'frontstage', epistemic humility performed by politicians requires transparency in decision-making and a confidential relationship with citizens who are engaged with the values of civil society. It would be interesting to study the following questions: Can crisis management in democracies be successful without examining the knowledge basis of the decisions, and how can citizen mobilisation relate to epistemic humility or arrogance? Citizens have a pivotal role in monitoring government failures or transgressions and developing critical voices. Almost daily, organised press conferences by the Finnish government attempt to build trust with citizens through providing information 'face to face'. The original purpose of holding the press conferences was to tackle the campaigns of disinformation and the conspiracy theories that could have led to the rise of anti-democratic developments and populism. However, we have also seen how populist regimes, for example, in Brazil and the US, have legitimised denial or indecision in pandemic

prevention with arrogance towards the medical community and other sources of expert knowledge.

We underline here that the institutional formulation of epistemic humility as structurally manifested and shaped by societal conditions will require further research, especially that which addresses more carefully how to integrate theories of political science with epistemological discussions of ignorance. By discussing the institutional characterisation, we do not want to downplay the fact that individuals and their abilities, characteristics, and identities are relevant in recognising one's own epistemic limits. In our view, in terms of conducting further research, it is worth focusing more on the institutional perspective than on assessing only the characteristics of individual decision-makers. Considering the prevailing culture, including leadership culture, is also important. Leadership culture is probably related with issues of femininity and masculinity that reinforce the legitimacy of women and men leaders. We strongly support Bleicher's view (2021, 58) that analysing the COVID-19 emergency and related political decision-making could reveal how the dynamics of politics shapes transformation of non-knowledge in times of crisis, and it could form the foundation for the further development of the concept of epistemic humility.

Conclusions

At the end of her paper, Bleicher raises a relevant question: What if the crisis never ends? How should we then view epistemic humility, especially in the case of an ecological crisis—not to mention the climate change crisis, the end of which is not in sight? Again, in many countries with democratic regimes, the state of emergency and the restrictive measures offending civil liberties have been expected to end as soon as the reasons for maintaining them no longer hold. Contrary to this, in some countries with more autocratic regimes, such as Hungary and Poland, pandemic prevention has been used to transform the political system into one that is more repressive, and in this sense there is no end for the crisis. Researchers used to distinguish between fast and slow crises (Harjanne, Räisänen, and Eronen 2020). The former are growing rapidly and are being strongly addressed politically, as has been the case during the COVID-19 pandemic. The latter, in turn, evolve over time with an emphasis on institutional development in decision-making, as is the case with the climate change crisis. In this sense, Bleicher's desire to further study how the role of epistemic humility in decision-making could be justified and legitimised is highly relevant because slow crises require permanent changes at the systemic level, including so-called sustainable development changes (Mackard, Raven, and Truffer 2012).

There is a need for research projects that use comparative analysis and focus on ignorance surrounding COVID-19 pandemic prevention in different countries. Such studies would certainly deliver valuable insights regarding the possibilities and limitations of epistemic humility, and would help to answer many of the other questions that Bleicher has raised. Decision-making processes in fast and slow crises appear to be an appropriate field of study for the purpose of defining the concept of epistemic humility in greater detail.

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