

Can we deliberate? The challenge of motivated reasoning to autonomous and rational deliberation

David Moscrop (University of British Columbia)

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Abstract

Theories of democratic deliberation assume and require rational and autonomous individuals capable of generating preferences supported by reasons that can be communicated to others in a deliberative setting. However, a key theory in social and political psychology, the phenomenon of motivated reasoning, presents a challenge to these requirements. Motivated reasoning refers to biased, often unconscious, cognition that can generate distorted information search and evaluation and irrational, heteronomous preferences and supporting reasons. This poses a significant challenge to the epistemic defense of deliberative democracy as a theory of how individuals can generate more valid, correct, and reliable judgments and decisions. In this paper I explain why deliberation requires rational, autonomous participants. I then argue why the phenomenon of motivated reasoning is a serious threat to these requirements. I close by presenting three conceptual approaches to addressing and overcoming the challenge of motivated reasoning to autonomous and rational deliberation.

The deliberative turn

Ever since democratic theory took the “deliberative turn” in the 1980s, theories of deliberation have dominated discussions about democratic decision-making.¹ Deliberative democracy is principally understood in opposition to aggregative democracy. While the latter is grounded in social choice theory, and primarily committed to the aggregation of individual preferences, votes, and judgments in order to generate outputs,² the former concerns itself with generating or transforming preferences through rational argumentation and the exchange of reasons by all those affected by a decision (or by their representatives).³

Three kinds of supporting justifications underlie theories of deliberation: democratic, ethical, and epistemological. Each corresponds, respectively, to the expected ability of theories of deliberative democracy to support and enhance democratic institutions, to generate fair and legitimate decisions that encourage compliance, and to produce epistemically “better” (i.e. more valid, more justified, better understood) decisions.⁴ This article is concerned with the third kind of supporting justification for deliberative democracy: the generation of epistemically valid judgments through the collective exchange of preferences and supporting reasons. Such epistemically good judgments are valuable; indeed, if the claim made by proponents of the epistemic defense of deliberation are correct, then properly-constituted deliberations will yield improved issue and preference understanding among those who deliberate,⁵ which means better justifications for emergent preferences and, one would imagine, acceptable policy options.

In this article I ask *Can we deliberate?* I pose this question in light of the specific cognitive challenge to theories of deliberation by the phenomenon of motivated reasoning. This challenge is manifested in a threat to the autonomous agency required to establish

¹ Dryzek 2002, 1; Goodin 2008, 2.

² See, for instance, Kenneth Arrow’s classic *Social Choice and Individual Values*.

³ Elster 1998; Gutmann and Thompson 1996, 2004; Rawls 1996.

⁴ Warren 2008.

⁵ Chambers 2006.

statements needed to generate epistemically valid and authoritative judgments. In exploring and reaching an answer to that question, in this article I do four things. First, I argue in favour of a specific conception of personal autonomy that avoids two common sorts of problems definitional problems with the concept: overspecification and infinite regress. Second, I establish that epistemic deliberative democracy requires autonomous agents capable of connecting reasons and motivations to their preferences and judgments. Third, I explain how motivated reasoning can undermine autonomous deliberation. Finally, I very briefly sketch some potential approaches to addressing the problems raised by the challenge of motivated reasoning to epistemic deliberative democracy.

1. Varieties of personal autonomy

Part of the challenge of dealing with any discussion of autonomy is defining precisely what it means for someone to be autonomous. Autonomy is often loosely defined as a sort of freedom or the absence of constraints—what might be known as *external* autonomy. In this paper I am not concerned with that sort of autonomy. I am concerned with personal *internal* autonomy, which is broadly defined as having the ability to self-govern: the authority and capacity to self-direct one’s own actions *cognitively*. However, upon scratching the surface of what that means and requires, several possible approaches are revealed that do not fit neatly together. Two common sorts problems plague definitions of autonomy: overspecification, in which the conditions of autonomy are so narrowly defined that personal autonomy is impossible; and infinite regress, the failure to specify an ultimate and decisive point at which the presence or absence of personal autonomy can be affirmed.

One extreme conception of personal autonomy is that of “maximal autonomy,” which refers to radical, independent self-creation outside of any significant external direction or determination.⁶ This definition of autonomy, even as an ideal standard, suffers from the problem of overspecification. Indeed, the definition is incoherent on its face: socially, culturally, psychologically, and biologically it is an impossible standard to even approach, let alone meet. And moreover, it is unclear how one would measure compliance with attempts at pursuing it.

⁶ Berofsky 1995.

This problem also appears in incompatibilist accounts of autonomy. According to such accounts, *any* externally generated motivations for our actions over which we lack control are outside of our self-governance. The essence of the incompatibilist argument is that whenever we, as agents, lack *ultimate* causal control of our actions, we cannot be said to be autonomous, given that some external force has determined our actions. Accordingly, it is also the case, for incompatibilists, that free will and determinism cannot logically co-exist.⁷ However, again, the threshold for autonomy in the incompatibilist is overspecified, since the (implied) definition of autonomy as causal control over all factors that go into determining one's actions defines away the possibility of autonomy, since there will always be *some* possible force somewhere, at some point in time, that could plausibly be argued to significantly undermine autonomy.

More commonly, personal autonomy is defined as a second-order capacity, but such definitions tend to suffer from the problem infinite regress. Dworkin defines personal autonomy as "...a second-order capacity of persons to reflect critically upon their first-order preferences, desires, wishes...and the capacity to accept or attempt to change these in light of higher-order preferences and values."⁸ While this defining is more appealing and realistic, it suffers from a logical deficiency: the problem of infinite regress. Because first-order preferences may be formed heteronomously—i.e. determined by factors outside of the individual— on a second-order level, any affirmation or rejection of a preference, desire, or wish will also require its own justification (and affirmation) if it is also to be an autonomous choice, on and on, ad infinitum.⁹ However, by slightly modifying this definition, the problem of infinite regress can be addressed.

Christman defines autonomy as a *process* rather than as a state. It is a process of checks that acts as a kind of cognitive review process and underwriter. According to him, an individual is personally autonomous when "...the influences and conditions that give rise to the desire [or preference or intention] were factors that the agent approved of or did not resist, or would not have resisted had she attended to them, and that this judgment was or

⁷ van Inwagen, 1975.

⁸ Dworkin, 1988, p.20.

⁹ Christman 1991.

would have been made in a *minimally rational, non-self-deceived manner*.”¹⁰ Thus, in Christman’s formulation, an agent can only be said to be autonomous if she is aware “of the changes and development of her character and of why they came about,”¹¹ since only in this way can she encourage or resist these changes through implied or actual deliberation. To present the argument as Christman does:

- (i) A person P is autonomous relative to some desire D if it is the case that P did not resist the development of D when attending to this process of development, or P *would not have* resisted that development had P attended to the process;
 - (ii) The lack of resistance to the development of D did not take place (or would not have) under the influence of factors that inhibit self-reflection;
- and
- (iii) The self-reflection involved in condition (i) is (minimally) rational and involves no self-deception.¹²

His definition avoids the problem of infinite regress by fixing the conditions required for autonomy to the *first level* of evaluation: the *process* by which a desire, preference, or interest is formed.¹³ Thus the process of evaluation, if undertaken in conditions of minimal rationality and self-awareness, serves as both the necessary and sufficient condition of autonomy without the need to evaluate any *particular outcome*.

Since so much in this argument depends upon what is meant by autonomy, it is worth spending a bit more time specifying its definition. To be more precise, autonomy requires what Christman calls “minimal ‘internal’ conditions for rationality.”¹⁴ He cites a basic consistency of beliefs and desires as requirements, but stops short of demanding that there be an absolute and clear link between the epistemic process of developing internal consistency and the ontological objectivity of the external world. Thus autonomy requires

¹⁰ Christman 1991, p.22. Emphasis mine.

¹¹ Christman 1991, p.11.

¹² Christman 1991, p.11. Emphasis in original

¹³ Christman 1991, pp.18-19

¹⁴ Christman 1991, p.14.

only internal consistency, and not an absolute and objectively verifiable connection to some pre-established ontological reality—consistent, as mentioned above, with Warren’s argument about deliberation as epistemically valuable. The link here to the model of deliberative democracy that we are working with is obvious enough: participants in deliberation who are in search of epistemic validity must be capable of maintaining at least a basic internal consistency, otherwise the grounding upon which the deliberative enterprise rests is subject to its own inconsistency, though this does not require universal agreement on any given ontological reality. The decision, however, must reflect a logical consistency that is unlikely to emerge if it is drawn from a collection of illogical internal processes; and even if it did, it could not be said to be the product of an epistemically valid process.

Autonomy, for Christman, also requires that “the influences and conditions” surrounding a judgment, through the interests, preferences, and desires that support such a judgment, were approved of by the agent—or would have been—under what we might call conditions of sufficient awareness (a minimal level of knowledge about factors relevant to the judgment at hand). Autonomy requires that the agent be in a position to assent to all of the immediate factors that contribute to a desire. This requires, as Christman notes, critical self-reflection.¹⁵ To this point I add a clarifying coda: autonomy also requires that the factors considered be *the actual mobilizing agents related to the desire or judgment*. That is to say that an agent is only autonomous to the extent that the process of self-reflection he undertakes in the process of approving of a desire or judgment *accurately* links “influences and conditions” to outcomes and is not interrupted by some internal or external force. This requirement for autonomy is what I am referring to as the principle of non-self-deception, and it is premised on the hypothesis that while self-deception is a common enough occurrence among agents, it is possible to minimize how often it occurs and how significant its effects are when it does occur.¹⁶

¹⁵ Christman 1991, p.11.

¹⁶ For more on this, see Kant’s distinction between autarchy—the capacity to make decisions for oneself—and autonomy—the capacity to accurately give reasons for one’s decisions—in Elstub 2008, Guyer 2005, and Kant 1998 [1785].

2. Why does epistemic deliberative democracy require autonomous decision makers?

Why is personal autonomy important to and necessary for epistemic deliberative democracy? Before addressing this central question, it is necessary to define precisely what “epistemic deliberative democracy” is. Perhaps the leading theory of epistemic deliberation is Estlund’s epistemic proceduralism.¹⁷ Estlund’s epistemic proceduralism clearly distinguishes between purely procedural theories, which rely on some procedural good for legitimacy—such as Rawls’ justice as fairness—and thick, correctness-based epistemic theories. While the former is only concerned with establishing fair procedures for decision making in order to generate legitimate outcomes, the latter requires that decisions be “correct” in order to be legitimate and authoritative: for instance, as the most popular product of a majority vote—or the “General Will.” In Rousseau’s conception of the General Will—the ultimate correctness theory—the minority in a decision is forced to surrender their judgment to the ‘morally correct’ outcome, accepting it as both legitimate and correct based on the high probability that the will of the majority is accurate.¹⁸

In contrast, Estlund’s epistemic proceduralism requires that the minority accept a majority decision as legitimate but not as *correct* as long as it is the outcome a properly constituted and fair procedure that has the tendency to generate correct outcomes (within a given, broader political or ethical system) on a better-than-random basis. The core of this argument rests of “the counterpart” of procedural fairness, epistemic proceduralism, which Estlund defines as: “procedural impartiality among individuals’ opinions, but with a tendency to be correct; the impartial application of intelligence to the moral question at hand.”¹⁹ In the absence of a procedure-independent moral standard for producing and judging an outcome, this approach ensures that compliance based on the procedure’s tendency to produce correct outcomes often enough, rather than mere fairness or the

¹⁷ Estlund 2008.

¹⁸ Estlund 2008, pp.102-105.

¹⁹ Estlund 2008, p.107.

certainty that any decision produced must be morally correct—a requirement that necessitates some prior established standard that exists outside of deliberation.²⁰

So why do theories of deliberative democracy, in so far as they are defended as epistemically superior approaches to generating valid and legitimate political decisions, require personal autonomy of the sort outline above? If the deliberative approach to democracy is to live up to its claim of producing correct decisions, even if on a mere better-than-random-chance basis, then that process will require that individuals connect their *actual reasons and motivations* to preferences that can be clearly communicated to others in a deliberative setting with fidelity to reality. That way, ultimately, the decisions that are generated through deliberation can be reasonably expected to link facts about the world—as they are interpreted and established by those assembled individuals—to reasons, then to their preferences, and, finally, to the decisions that are generated by those assembled to deliberate. What autonomy ensures in this instance is the high-fidelity translation of the empirical and normative realities of deliberators into preferences, backed by motivations and reasons of which those deliberators are aware. What autonomy guards against is the presence of an internal (to the individual) fifth-column that acts to distort those empirical and normative realities in such a way that the preferences generated by those individuals do not match their true preferences (i.e. those they would have chosen in a state of autonomy).

In a deliberative assembly, the absence of a critical mass of autonomous individuals presents an elevated risk that the outcomes generated will be incorrect within the given political or ethical parameters of the deliberation due to *structural distortion in judgment and decision-making tendencies*. This directly undermines the epistemic proceduralist defense of deliberation as an approach to decision-making that generates correct outcomes on a better-than-random basis. This is because the effects of the failure to reach a state of full autonomy (both in deliberative settings and non-deliberative settings) *are structural, rather than random*. The effects are *structural* in two ways: first, they are structural in terms of *who they directly effect*; second, they are structural in terms of *who is affected by*

²⁰ Estlund 2008, p.108.

outcomes related to them. In the former instance, those most directly affected by a breakdown in autonomy—due to a lack of comprehension about the information they are using—tend to be less-educated, low-information citizens.²¹ In the latter instance, those disproportionately affected by heteronomously generated preferences and outcomes tend to be people of colour,²² the poor and undereducated,²³ and groups who tend to already suffer deleterious effects due to negative stereotyping.²⁴

3. Motivated reasoning as a challenge to deliberative democracy

What is motivated reasoning?

So far I have argued that for theories of deliberative democracy to serve as plausible accounts of how to generate epistemically better judgments and decisions those who deliberate must be autonomous in a constrained sense. I have also claimed that the psychological phenomenon of motivated reasoning undermines autonomy and thus threatens to undermine the epistemic defense of deliberative democracy. In the following section I will explain what motivated reasoning is and outline specifically how it affects deliberators and undermines the epistemic authority of deliberations.

The phenomenon of motivated reasoning refers to “reliance on a biased set of cognitive processes: strategies for accessing, constructing, and evaluating beliefs.”²⁵ Motivated reasoning serves as a core (potentially non-conscious) strategy employed by human beings in the interpretation of the world and the construction of reality—towards less accurate or more accurate, or better or worse, ends. In her review article on theory and evidence from the practice of deliberation, Tali Mendelberg notes, referencing Taber et al., the bias in motivated reasoning “occurs at every step of information processing, from setting goals, to gathering and evaluating evidence from the outside or from memory, to

²¹ See Althaus 1998; Chong and Druckman 2007; Converse 1964; Cutler 2002; Iyengar et al. 1982; Kuklinski and Quirk 2000; Zaller 1992.

²² Mendelberg 2001; Sniderman et al. 1986.

²³ Althaus 1998; Zaller 1992.

²⁴ Kuklinski and Quirk 2000.

²⁵ Kunda 1990, p.480.

constructing inferences and judgments.”²⁶ Furthermore, she cites Bodenhausen and Macrae in pointing out that motivated sources of motivated reasoning: self-presentation, which comes from the desire to appear good, and self-deception, in which individuals are entirely unaware that they are in error or deluded.²⁷ The latter is the sort with which I am concerned in this article.

In the case of self-deceptive motivated reasoning, there are two kinds: accuracy-driven reasoning and directional-driven reasoning. Accuracy-driven reasoning occurs when a subject is motivated to get the conclusion “right”—such as when there are rewards for a correct outcome or when the subject is required to justify their judgment publicly—and *tends to generate* more cognitive effortful, careful, and complex thinking, though there are limitations to avoiding biased cognition even under these circumstances.²⁸ In the context of motivated reasoning, the word “bias” is, at least in its theoretical usage, stripped of any normative or ethically-evaluative (e.g. fair or unfair) content and instead refers to the phenomenon of prejudiced selection of tactics or strategies. Directionally-driven goals involve far less cognitive effort, care, and complexity; individuals who are directionally-driven are motivated to reach a defensible conclusion, but not necessarily the correct one. Under conditions of directionally-driven reasoning, individuals tend to maintain an “illusion of objectivity”²⁹ and reason in such a way that cognitive biases tend to be employed non-consciously—that is, without deliberate reflection and an active choice to employ them—and heavily directed towards maintaining or enhancing existing beliefs or preferences or reaching some desired conclusion.³⁰ While individuals reasoning towards directionally-driven goals cannot reach or justify *just any conclusion whatsoever*, they tend to reach use common tactics to reach more-or-less defensible, directionally-driven (and often biased) conclusions. Tactics for reaching such conclusions include selectively searching one’s memory for beliefs or evidence that support or confirm the desired conclusion, “creatively” combining and integrating existing and new evidence in such a way that supports the

²⁶ Mendelberg 2002 referencing Taber et al. 2001, p.168.

²⁷ Mendelberg 2002 referencing Bodenhausen and Macrae 1998, p.169.

²⁸ Kruglanski and Klar 1987; Kunda 1990.

²⁹ Pyszczynski and Greenberg 1987.

³⁰ Kahan 2013; Lodge and Taber 2013; Redlawsk 2002.

outcome they are after, and selectively choosing statistical heuristics that fit with their desired conclusions.³¹ Challenging or disconfirming evidence in such cases tends to be ignored or rationalized in such a way that either minimizes conflicting or unwanted counter-evidence or else explains it away.

In summary, according to Kunda, “both kinds of goals affect reasoning by influencing the choice of beliefs and strategies applied to a given problem. But accuracy goals lead to the use of those beliefs and strategies that are considered most appropriate, whereas directional goals lead to the use of those that are considered most likely to yield the desired conclusion.”³² So, *a great deal of reasoning is biased*; thus when it comes to individual reasoning in a political context, the question is not whether or not there is a biased—in the non-normative sense mentioned above—use of tactics or strategies for cognition, but whether the direction of cognition is towards accuracy or some non-conscious self-serving directional goal.³³ We can now ask what the effects of motivated reasoning are on the practice of deliberative democracy and the kinds of judgments and decisions produced by democratic deliberation.

The sources of directional motivated reasoning vary and each poses different threats to epistemically good democratic deliberation. When it comes to political matters, attachment to a political party can lead to partisan motivated reasoning, which emerges from the relationship between an individual and their emotional attachment to a particular political party seen as representing or defending a group with which they identify.³⁴ Related to this challenge, individuals asked to evaluate candidates are cognitively biased in favor of their existing preferences, in stark violation of Bayesian assumptions about the tendency of individuals to make fair, rational evaluations from memory rather than “hot” (i.e. affect-driven), immediate, and running evaluations with the goal of maintaining one’s existing

³¹ Kunda 1990, p.483-488.

³² Kunda 1990, p.481.

³³ Of course there is nothing inherently wrong with pursuing certain self-interested goals; however, when motivations are buried, they remain outside of public awareness and are not subject to public understanding and interrogation.

³⁴ Leeper and Slothuus 2014, pp.136-137.

preferences despite new or altered evidence.³⁵ There are at least three structural cognitive errors, driven by motivated reasoning, occurring in these circumstances. The first is confirmation bias related to information search surrounding candidates they already approve of: individuals are looking to confirm what they already know and for which they hold positive affective evaluations. Of course, when what they believe is accurate and constructive, this phenomenon can be a significant asset, but when it is not, it may work against error-correction and, potentially, one's ability to act in their own self-interest.³⁶ The second, related to the first, is disconfirmation bias. In instances of disconfirmation bias, individuals will argue against, denigrate, explain away, or at least discount, information that challenges their pre-existing preference and will actively seek to disconfirm evidence that violates their assumptions and preferences.³⁷ The third cognitive error present in these circumstances is the anchoring effect: voters, presented with negative evidence about a candidate they prefer, will actually *strengthen their support* for that candidate if they have already decided to support them.³⁸ Initial evaluations of a candidate, reinforced by biased searches for information and further biased processing of information about that candidate, create a strong anchor that either withstands challenges that should generate an adjustment, or, as noted, warps that adjustment so that evidence pushes an evaluation towards a candidate, when it should be pushing it away.

Why is motivated reasoning a threat to epistemically good democratic deliberation?

The challenge of motivated reasoning to democratic deliberation is not one that can be explained away by asserting that the ideal of rational deliberation is a chimera, and that those who deliberate are necessarily human and thus predictably prone to a mix of rational and emotional thinking. Motivated reasoning is a specific and real challenge to deliberative democracy, not because it is emotional, but because *it is hidden*. The problem with motivated reasoning is that it obscures motivations and makes it much more difficult for participants in a deliberation to put all their concerns and reasons on the table in order to

³⁵ Redlawsk, 2002.

³⁶ Redlawsk, 2002, p.1025.

³⁷ Taber, Cann, and Kucsova, 2009, pp.137-139.

³⁸ Redlawsk, 2002, pp.1025-1026.

sort things out. So the question we should ask is not whether emotions or affective-based forms of reasoning—including motivated reasoning—can be eliminated from deliberation, but whether or not they can be interrogated, brought out into the open, and managed.

We might assume that accuracy-directed cognition in a deliberative setting is epistemically desirable and that prompting accuracy goals is a solution to the challenge of motivated reasoning to epistemically good deliberation. After all, the epistemic concern of deliberation is getting to correct judgments and subsequent decisions. However, there are two problems with this. First, accuracy prompts do not always lead individuals to overcome the effects of motivated reasoning.³⁹ So, the cognitive baggage that individuals bring with them into a deliberation cannot always be unpacked and set aside. And second, absent a consensus on what counts as “accurate” information within the group, the epistemic function of deliberation might be compromised and may result in a situation in which not only is a correct decision not reached, but sub-optimal outcomes are generated or exacerbated. In this case, a structural bias might be built into the structure of a democratic deliberation before it even begins and may influence proceedings from the get go. These two concerns encapsulate the general threat of motivated reasoning to deliberation: common, persistent, and entrenched biased reasoning.

Motivated reasoning then generates more specific threats to democratic deliberation, which I will outline here. One specific threat related to the concern of the anchoring effect and generated by motivated reasoning is the “boomerang effect.” This occurs when some messaging strategy or approach inadvertently generates the *opposite* of the desired effect—and thus polarizes participants. So, in the context of a deliberation, some participants who are directionally-motivated may be induced to become further entrenched in their beliefs and less likely to support certain policies, even when presented with factual information contrary to their existence beliefs or preferences or good arguments in favor of a certain policy—which can have a further polarizing effect.⁴⁰ Indeed, in an experiment on motivated reasoning and preferences on climate change policy in the United States, Hart and Nisbet found that political partisanship had an effect on support for

³⁹ Kunda 1990; Redlawsk, 2002, pp. 1033-1035.

⁴⁰ Hart and Nisbet, 2012.

climate change and that new information—shared equally and presented identically—*further polarized* opinions on climate change between Republicans and Democrats.⁴¹ And if such effects are combined with a group in which a minority-type is outnumbered, polarization can become worse through increased (non-cognitive) bias and decreased cooperation.⁴²

Another specific challenge from motivated reasoning to epistemically good deliberation is that it violates the basic deliberative requirement that strategic considerations be left outside the room, or, at least, that they are largely muted. Instead, as noted, motivated reasoning threatens to generate *structural* error into deliberation, thus threatening the epistemic force of deliberation as a theory of democratic decision making that produces correct outcomes on a better-than-chance basis. In regards to the epistemic function of deliberation, motivated reasoning undermines attempts at building shared understanding and generating shared preferences by increasing the chances of a boomerang effect occurring and by undermining the reliability of relatively stable, open—and therefore transparent—motivations that are open to discussion and debate. Moreover, motivated reasoning generates goals, incentives, and contributes to the generation of supporting arguments (or rationalizations) which may not be brought about absent such reasoning. Consequently, motivated reasoning *structurally violates* the principle of autonomy required for deliberation. When motivated reasoning is strong in a deliberation, the risk of a sort of shadow deliberation emerges: a kind of perverted deliberation that is taken place alongside the primary deliberation, based on factors and motivations that have little or nothing to do with the deliberation at hand. This is a significant threat to both the spirit and practice of deliberative democracy since if individuals were fully aware of the source of their motivations they might reason differently and present different preferences and justifications for those preferences.

5. How should theorists of deliberation respond to the challenge?

⁴¹ Hart and Nisbet, 2012; see also Taber, Cann, and Kucsova, 2009.

⁴² Bettencourt and Dorr, 1998.

As challenging as motivated reasoning is to epistemic defenses of deliberative democracy, its existence alone is not enough to warrant dropping the epistemic defense of deliberation all together. For one, the challenge of motivated reasoning is probably worse in non-deliberative political settings. But, more importantly, it is highly likely that sophisticated deliberative design, both at the level of particular deliberative events (i.e. one-off deliberations or series of deliberations) and deliberative systems (i.e. institutionalized deliberative democracy) can attenuate the deleterious effects of motivated reasoning, even if they are unable to eliminate them all together. If we believe that structure dictates function—that the way something is designed will impact how it is used—then there may be a number of ways to change how cognition is “used” in deliberations, and thus to improve judgments made in democratic deliberation. Theorists of deliberation should respond to the challenge of motivated reasoning by changing how deliberations are structured and carried out. In this section I will briefly outline five *approaches* to minimizing the negative effects of motivated reasoning on the epistemic value of democratic deliberation. These approaches represent a mix of my own ideas and those of others drawn from literature in social psychology and political science and combined together in such a way as to directly address the challenge of cognitive distortion—in this case motivated reasoning—in the context of democratic deliberation.

Targeted motivation

As I have argued throughout this piece, inducing accuracy-driven goals is essential to moderating the effect of motivated reasoning, even if such inducements may not all together, or always, eliminate the challenge of such reasoning. Indeed, it is likely that it will require a combination of several approaches to seriously arrest the impacts of motivated reasoning on the production of epistemically good judgments in deliberative settings. Targeted motivation, however, is the first and most important approach to addressing this challenge. It relies on an understanding of the elaboration likelihood model (ELM), which was developed in the 1980s by psychologists Richard Petty and John Cacioppo. Petty and Cacioppo used dual-process theory in the model to specify two general routes through which a statement or argument might be processed: the central route, along which subjects were more likely to scrutinize a message, and a peripheral route along which subjects were

more likely to employ cognitive short-cuts and external cues to evaluate it.⁴³ As the authors discovered, the key to getting subjects to employ the first route—one far better suited to the goals and exigencies deliberative democracy—was motivation: various factors, including a message’s relevance or the availability of cognitive resources, went into determining which route a subject was likely to take.⁴⁴

Targeted motivation is an attempt to engage central-processing through highlighting to participants in a deliberation the relevance and importance of an issue and making it explicit that participants will be asked to explain and justify their preferences and underlying reasons to the gathered group. The goal of targeted motivation is to increase the probability that accuracy-driven goals are primed prior to issue-related cognition. Targeted motivation can be further subdivided into particular tactics aimed at engaging individuals. Specifically, targeted motivation should take the form of ensuring that: i) arguments are presented in clear, manageable form and language; ii) individuals are given appropriate amounts of time to scrutinize information, ask questions, and discuss their perspectives; iii) rewards for adopting peripheral methods are minimized or eliminated (e.g. rewards for finishing early or before another group or sub-group); iv) individuals are presented with clear arguments as to why a given issue is relevant to them, their families and friends, their community, city, state, or country; v) the environment in which deliberation occurs is free from distracting elements, including any stimuli that may provide subtle nudges as to which way a participant should decide.

When it comes to motivated reasoning as a threat to autonomy and epistemically good deliberative judgments, within the context of deliberation, targeted motivation may assist in shifting subjects’ attention towards the subject matter as well as *how they think about the subject matter*. This focus should help maximize the likelihood that individuals scrutinize the data and arguments presented to them, as well as bring some scrutiny to bear on their *cognitive process* for reaching a judgment. Targeted motivation alone may not entirely address the challenge of motivated cognition by cueing accuracy-directed goals; it

⁴³ Petty 1999; Petty and Cacioppo 1981, 1986.

⁴⁴ Chaiken and Trope 1999; Jae and Delvecchio 2004; Petty, Wells, and Brock 1976

may, however, minimize instances of motivated reasoning. It may also enable other tactics, which I will discuss below, to work or else to work better.

Arational receptivity

Motivated reasoning is driven by affect—and while much of the processing that occurs under conditions of motivated reasoning is hidden from consciousness, the *effects* of such are potentially traceable, if individuals are able and willing to interrogate them. Arational receptivity is a state in which individuals are open to publicly questioning and discussing—within the context of a group deliberation—their affective disposition towards particular issues and their related preferences. Cultivating openness to scrutinizing the affective dispositions one has towards certain issues and concomitant preferences could help generate stronger accuracy-driven goals and attenuate directionally-driven ones, especially in a public setting, by reminding participants and facilitators that when it comes to generating judgments affect is an entrenched and necessary element.

In fact, as neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has shown, feelings and emotions (what I lump together as “affect”) do important cognitive work and are essential for both mundane day-to-day choices as well as more complex decisions.⁴⁵ Just as notably, Heath and Pinker have neatly summarized, there are good evolutionary reasons why affect looms large in our lives: it is necessary for providing cues based on past experience that are needed for future decisions.⁴⁶ This should not come as a surprise: brain systems drawing on affective considerations and processing tend to be faster and more efficient—if also more prone to error and bias—than those relying on rational reflection and processing.⁴⁷ So, when it comes to the force of affect, we ought to row with the current, though we should also work hard to know where it is taking us. Returning to Kant: autonomy requires that individuals have both choices and reasons for choices; I hasten to add that true autonomy requires that individuals have *valid and accurate* reasons for choices, which would include the emotions,

⁴⁵ Damasio 1994, 2003.

⁴⁶ Heath 2014; Pinker 1997.

⁴⁷ Kahneman 2011.

and feelings that play a role in generating and perhaps sustaining those choices and which must be acknowledged if accuracy-driven goals are to be facilitated over directional-goals.

Cognitive diversity

Those who are subject to the effects of motivated reasoning and the directional-goals generated by it are, as I have discussed, also prone to polarization and boomerang effects under certain conditions when their reasons or preferences are challenged. However, as I have also mentioned, conditions generating high-elaboration in cognition—that is, more explicit, sustained thinking—are more likely to generate accuracy-driven goals—which should mean that more autonomous and rational deliberation will be brought about. Thus a key challenge to overcoming the threat of directional motivated reasoning to the epistemic defense of democratic deliberation is finding ways to move individuals who deliberate from “cognitive auto-pilot” to a more engaged and reflective state *without polarizing the group*. I believe that targeted motivation and arational receptivity are two important tools for this, but they may also require that groups be cognitively diverse.

According to Landemore cognitive diversity “refers to a diversity of ways of seeing the world, interpreting problems in it, and working out solutions to these problems. It denotes more specifically a diversity of perspectives...interpretations...heuristics...and predictive models.”⁴⁸ In deliberative contexts, the presence of cognitive diversity is hypothesized to improve decision-making⁴⁹ and increase the quality of argumentation.⁵⁰ So the presence of diverse ways of thinking may also offer a cognitive jolt to those who might otherwise rely heavily on the low-resource motivated reasoning when processing information and coming to judgments. Once again, the mechanism at work in such a case would likely be a shift from directional goals to accuracy goals; and the presence of a properly-constituted diverse group⁵¹ might enhance the effect of accuracy goals and further diminish motivated reasoning—potentially even eliminating, or at least significantly checking, the boomerang effect. At this stage, the cognitive diversity hypothesis is still

⁴⁸ Landemore 2013.

⁴⁹ Page 2007.

⁵⁰ Landemore 2013.

⁵¹ Mendelberg 2002.

largely experimental—it is, still, a hypothesis—and more research is required into its long-term effects, plausibility, and generalizability. This is especially important in relation to how, if at all, cognitive diversity interacts with motivated reasoning and more specifically directional goals and polarization. None the less, if having diverse ways of approaching a problem means that individuals are more inclined to critically engage, and to consider closely their reasoning pattern, is promising.

6. Conclusion

Motivated reasoning, because it occurs largely non-consciously, violates the principle of autonomy discussed above and which, I have argued, is essential for generating epistemically good deliberative outcomes. Specifically, it does so by concealing the motivations of an individual who deliberates (i.e. to preserve and protect one's current worldview) and biasing both the process of generating reasons for or against a preference and the reasons themselves. Of course the phenomenon of motivated reasoning is not absolute and necessary, and can be attenuated. But as we have seen, it is commonplace, occurs in deliberations, and remains persistent in some cases despite efforts to counteract it with inducement to generating accuracy-driven outputs.

Occurrences of motivated reasoning act as challenges to democratic deliberation, but they do not render it useless—or even make it a less preferable alternative to aggregative democracy, which is easily worse at generating and exacerbating motivated reasoning in individuals engaged in political acts. Rather than gainsaying the value of such deliberation, the phenomenon of motivated reasoning points to an area of theories of deliberation—its epistemic defense—that requires further exploration and elaboration. It also serves as a reminder to both scholars and practitioners of deliberative democracy that deliberative design, at both the individual levels of particular deliberative events and the general level of institutional deliberative setup, that more work must be done if we are to generate the best possible outcomes from democratic deliberations.

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