POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE AND PUBLIC VIRTUES

CONOCIMIENTO POLÍTICO Y VIRTUDES PÚBLICAS

Denis Coitinho

Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos - Brazil

deniscoitinhosilveira@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-2592-5590

**Recibido: 2 de mayo de 2022; aceptado: 6 de junio de 2022*

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to reflect upon the scope of political knowledge as a counterpoint to the epistocratic argument defended by Jason Brennan in *Against Democracy.* To this end, I will begin by presenting Brennan's conception of knowledge and ignorance, together with his interpretation of the nature of politics. I will then investigate the meaning of knowledge and ignorance from the standpoint of virtue epistemology. Following this, I will analyze the very essence of the political domain and consider the public virtues of prudence and civic friendship. Lastly, I will discuss the phenomenon of moral progress, in order to show that tribalism is neither the essence of human moral nature nor a preclusion of political knowledge and that there is thus no conclusive reason for defending the restriction of public participation in the political process.

Keywords: Political knowledge, ignorance, prudence, civic friendship, moral progress.

Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo es reflexionar sobre el alcance del saber político como contrapunto al argumento epistocrático defendido por Jason Brennan en *Against Democracy.* Para ello, comenzaré presentando la concepción del conocimiento y la ignorancia según Brennan, junto con su interpretación de la naturaleza de la política. Luego investigaré el significado del conocimiento y la ignorancia desde el punto de vista de la epistemología de la virtud. A continuación, analizaré la esencia misma del dominio político y consideraré las virtudes públicas de la prudencia y la amistad cívica. Por último, discutiré el fenómeno del progreso moral, para mostrar que el tribalismo

no es ni la esencia de la naturaleza moral humana ni una exclusión del conocimiento político, y que -por lo tanto- no hay una razón concluyente para defender la restricción de la participación pública en la vida política.

Palabras clave: Conocimiento político, ignorancia, prudencia, amistad cívica, progreso moral.

Introduction

In *Against Democracy*, Jason Brennan defends an epistocratic argument by claiming that most voters nowadays are politically ignorant and irrational and that this ignorance is the cause of decisions, which are incompetent, unjust, and illegitimate. As such, he maintains that voters' rights should be restricted and that a specie of epistocracy should be implemented within the democratic process. This is because the choice of who should form a government is a political decision made through universal suffrage (Brennan, 2017, pp. 3-15). The main point of Brennan's argument is to show that most citizens are ignorant, apathetic, and irrational, in other words, they are either *Hobbits* or *Hooligans* who make tribal political decisions, thus compromising the whole democratic system (Brennan, 2017, pp. 3-8). He proposes a conditional thesis, saying that if epistocracy is indeed better for democracy, then it should certainly be implemented so that political power can be distributed according to individual knowledge or competence. This type of epistocracy is based on an "antiauthority tenet" which posits the following:

> When some citizens are morally unreasonable, ignorant, or incompetent about politics, this justifies *not permitting* them to exercise political authority over others. It justifies either forbidding them from holding power or reducing the power they have in order to protect innocent people from their incompetence (Brennan, 2017, p. 17).

This appears to imply that the restriction of universal suffrage would be based on the epistemic criterion of ignorance regarding political matters. The problem is that Brennan does not explain in any detail what "knowledge" and "ignorance" are, nor does he have much to say about the concept of "politics" *per se*. Although I find it tempting to defend democracy against epistocracy, my objective in this paper is much more modest. I shall confine myself to investigating the scope of political knowledge and

ignorance, while at the same time trying to reflect on what specifically constitutes the political domain. This is important because it seems unjust to restrict the votes of certain people based on such a complex concept as “ignorance”. The distinction between what people “know” and “ignore” is in any case arbitrary, especially in the political sphere, where those citizens who would suffer this type of electoral restriction would probably come from the most deprived sectors of society.

Firstly, Brennan does not clarify exactly what constitutes knowledge and ignorance. In Chapter 2 of his book, he merely gives examples of voters’ lack of knowledge: that in election years they are unable to identify any of the congressional candidates in their district, that they are unaware of which is the governing party in Congress, and that they underestimate how much public money is spent on international aid (Brennan, 2017, pp. 25-30). These examples appear to show that he is equating knowledge with the possession of information in politics, history, sociology, and economics, as well as in other related fields. But is it true to say that knowledge is indeed equivalent to possessing certain types of information? In addition to this, Brennan treats the concept of knowledge as if it were simply all or nothing rather than a matter of degree. It is as if one either has political knowledge or one is ignorant. Further examples of this would be having sufficient political and legal knowledge to be aware that US policy in relation to the war on drugs is, in fact, counterproductive and biased against minorities, or that having adequate medical knowledge is necessary to save the life of someone who is choking (Brennan, 2017, pp. 117, 122).

This perspective transmits the idea that some citizens have more political knowledge than others, and that political facts are easy to identify. In this way, political

knowledge is considered like scientific knowledge, in the sense that it is based on evidence. In the light of this, it is not difficult to see that Brennan is using the concept of knowledge in a traditional manner, i.e., as a synonym for justified true belief. Ignorance is the converse of this and implies the taking of political decisions without reference to evidence, but, rather, basing them on tribal prejudices. I will argue that knowledge is much more complex than Brennan supposes.

Secondly, Brennan does not clarify the scope of politics. He says that politics is not like a poem, thereby distancing himself from any romantic view of the subject, in which it would have the role of bringing together members of the community, educating, and civilizing them, while fostering friendship and sound political principles. In fact, Brennan's view is the direct opposite of this, i.e., to separate, paralyze and corrupt citizens (Brennan, 2017, p. xv).

This implies an instrumentalist view of politics based only on its function as if it were a hammer with the sole purpose of promoting the welfare of the electorate. According to this view, we should choose the political regime which creates the best results, i.e., one which produces more justice, eliminates poverty, brings an end to wars, and guarantees the safety of the population. Brennan maintains that political participation is a source of corruption rather than a force for the development of citizens' moral and intellectual character, in the sense that such participation and its corresponding freedoms have only an instrumental and non-intrinsic value. He, therefore, believes that a fairer political result will be produced if democracy is replaced by some form of epistocracy (Brennan, 2017, pp. 18-19). Furthermore, he treats politics as if it were a technique and a way of controlling people's lives, a zero-sum

game in which victory means the certain defeat of opponents (Brennan, 2017, pp. 124-132).

This instrumentalist view seems to reduce politics to a mere struggle for power, especially in the case of elections and does not recognize the representative and symbolic value of a choice in this domain. No matter how many electors decide and vote according to cognitive biases, especially those of tribalism and confirmation bias, one must recognize that they still give value to their choices. This is because they see themselves as autonomous and responsible so any attempt at restriction will lead to a loss of self-esteem and a perceived change in social practices, particularly in terms of elections as such. It is also important to recognize that, over and above the electoral process, politics appears to be related to an attempt to find negotiated solutions to conflicts of opinion. Indeed, the creation of the United Nations (UN) and the proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are based on this very principle.

In the light of the above, my main objective in this paper will be to reflect on the scope of political knowledge. I will begin by investigating the nature of knowledge and ignorance based on virtue epistemology. I shall then discuss two of the most central public virtues, prudence, and civic friendship. Finally, I will consider the phenomenon of moral progress in order to show that cognitive biases do not make political knowledge impossible, but simply more difficult.

Knowledge and ignorance

As stated above, in *Against Democracy* Jason Brennan does not fully clarify the concepts of “knowledge” and “ignorance”, and if we look closely at the examples he

gives in relation to these concepts, it appears that he views them from a traditionalist standpoint, namely, he views "knowledge" as a justified true belief or as a true belief assured with adequate evidence (Chisholm, 1957, pp. 54-66) and "ignorance" as a lack of knowledge or of holding false beliefs as a result of insufficient evidence. For Brennan, one of the central problems of politics is that people tend to ignore empirical evidence and make tribalistic decisions (often based on intergroup bias, or as a form of confirmation bias), whilst only accepting evidence, which supports their own point of view.[1]

Let us consider an example of political knowledge and ignorance given by Brennan. He says that US voters tend to ignore the effects of the war on drugs in relation to minorities, since taking hard measures against this type of crime tends to be more prejudicial to poor people, Black people, and Latinos. It is more likely that an epistocratic voter would know that such a policy in relation to drug crimes is counterproductive (Brennan, 2017, p. 117). The evidence for this knowledge is that most of those found guilty and imprisoned for such crimes are indeed poor people, Black people, and Latinos and that therefore continuing the war on drugs will only increase the prison population of these minorities. The problem is that the affirmation produced by this evidence does not indicate what alternative policy could be introduced to resolve the issue. For example, would it be enough to decriminalize drug use, or should we still legalize the consumption of certain drugs, and is there any guarantee that such

[1] Brennan makes reference to a significant group of cognitive biases which appear to have a negative influence on political decisions: (i) Political tribalism: this is the tendency to feel animosity towards rival groups and to reject everything they claim; (ii) Confirmation bias: the tendency to accept evidence which confirms the person's point of view, and to ignore all evidence which goes against it; (iii) Availability bias: the tendency towards error in estimating probabilities; (iv) Affective contagion: the tendency to ignore facts for emotional reasons; (v) Framing effects: the tendency to evaluate information at face value; (vi) Peer pressure and authority: the tendency of the person to subject their opinion to that of the majority, and to accept the views of those in authority (Brennan, 2017, pp. 39-48).

an alternative policy would not have a negative effect on the health of the overall population? Even in terms of the empirical world, having sufficient evidence does not automatically imply knowledge (as Edmund Gettier points out), and the situation becomes much more complex within the realm of politics.

In his seminal paper written in 1963, Edmund Gettier puts forward two cases, which show that it is possible to reach a true and justifiable belief randomly, that is, by luck. This traditionalist view is based on the following conditions in relation to the concept of knowledge: (a) S knows that P if and only if (i) P is true, (ii) S believes that P, and (iii) S is justified in believing that P. Or, according to Chisholm: (b) S knows that P IFF (i) S accepts P, (ii) S has adequate evidence for P, and (iii) P is true. Or, according to Ayer: (c) S knows that P if and only if (i) P is true, (ii) S is sure that P is true, and (iii) S has the right to be sure that P is true (GETTIER, 1963, p. 121).

Gettier's main point here is to show that these conditions are insufficient for obtaining knowledge. As a first example, let us suppose that Smith and Jones have both applied for a certain job. Let us further suppose that Smith has robust evidence for the following conjunctive proposition: (d) Jones is the man who will get the job, and Jones has ten coins in his pocket. The evidence that Smith has in favour of this proposition is that the president of the company assured him that Jones would in the end be selected and that he, Smith, had counted the coins in Jones's pocket ten minutes ago. This proposition, therefore, implies that (e) The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. Let us then suppose that Smith sees that (d) implies (e) and that he accepts (e) on the grounds of (d), in favour of which he has reliable proof. In this case, Smith is clearly justified in believing that (e) is true. But imagine, further, that unknown to Smith, he himself, not Jones, will get the job. And, also, unknown to

Smith, he himself has ten coins in his pocket. Then, proposition (e) is true, even though proposition (d) is false (Gettier, 1963, pp. 121-122).

Based on this example, we can see that “being justified in believing that P” “having adequate evidence for P” or “being appropriately sure” do not provide sufficient conditions for guaranteeing the truth of the propositions described above. Knowledge may therefore be interpreted from a more fallibilist perspective, in the sense that the probability and even the disposition of the agents concerned (and their regularity) might have a more relevant role, particularly if one considers the political sphere, which must also be considered, together with the emotions involved in the decision-making process. In the light of this, the virtue epistemology appears to be more adequate in relation to our intention of concentrating on the subject of political knowledge, since it does not understand the concept of knowledge as being a true and justified belief, but more as being a kind of successful performance. In *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflexive Knowledge*, Ernest Sosa claims that knowledge should be seen as the result of the intellectual virtues of a particular agent and that this is focused on their abilities and character. He also sees knowledge as a kind of successful performance, and as a kind of action, which is aiming for the truth. Knowledge is therefore obtained if the agent’s performance is apt, and this entails viewing knowledge as the result of the agent’s competence or virtues. Thus, performance is apt when it is successful, that is, when it achieves its objective as a result of the agent’s competence. He/she can be compared to an archer who shoots an arrow in an attempt to hit a target so that, if the archer is competent, the target will not be hit purely by luck. The archer will hit the target because of his/her aptitude and hitting the target, in this case, is tantamount to arriving at a successful belief reflexively (Sosa, 2007, pp. 22-23).

What is interesting about this alternative model is that it is possible to view knowledge as an expression of certain intellectual virtues. An example of this is prudence, which is the disposition to find adequate means to reach an adequate end, and such virtue is achieved through an ongoing process of habituation. It may be understood as a stable disposition of character on the part of the agent and represents a tendency in him/her to behave in a certain way since this virtue is a clear sign of the person's moral character. This disposition is an active one that requires habituation and experience. In *Intelligent Virtue*, Juliana Annas states that this virtue cannot be seen simply as part of a routine, as it needs constant monitoring in order to reach perfection and is therefore a disposition of character which provides a creative and imaginative response to new challenges (Annas, 2011, p. 14). Annas also makes an interesting analogy between virtue and practical ability, as in the case of playing the piano. One acquires a virtue such as prudence by acting prudently, in the same way, that one learns to play the piano through regular practice (Annas, 2011, pp. 1-7). Once one has acquired this virtue, one is more likely to produce a successful performance and achieve one's aim. In relation to the earlier example of the US war on drugs, a prudent person might also consider that the objective of such a policy could be even more damaging to society at large, and therefore decriminalization might be viewed as a better alternative to full legalization.

However, it is worth noting that a feeling of uncertainty about which policy to adopt is a natural practice for a prudent person, as he/she must consider various alternative scenarios before deciding which approach to adopt, without any guarantee that the final decision taken will really be the best one after all. In relation to this, it should be remembered that a state of uncertainty may be interpreted as a

manifestation of ignorance. Curiously, this phenomenon is generally interpreted as the absence of knowledge, and since knowledge traditionally aims to reach a true belief that is justified and guaranteed by adequate evidence, ignorance is, therefore, a false belief, as in the case of defending an increase in the level of punishment as a way of reducing criminality and enhancing national security. When viewed once again from a traditionalist standpoint, the prudent agent who has acquired wisdom through practice becomes a paradigm of what he/she knows and not an example of ignorance. But in relation to the criterion of virtue, having prudence may be considered as a kind of knowledge of the measures needed to reach a positive outcome which is circumscribed by a scenario of diversity and uncertainty.[2]

From the perspective of virtue epistemology, ignorance is best conceived as a state in which the agent uses unsuccessful beliefs as the basis for his/her political decisions, and this can also be understood as a state of absence of certain virtues. The advantage of this perspective is its inclusivity, since ignorance, in addition to being treated as equivalent to guaranteeing a false belief, may be interpreted as the defence of an unsuccessful belief, the suspension of judgment, the absence of careful consideration of a particular subject, or even a state of uncertainty.[3] A prudent agent would therefore be one who acquires political wisdom by making choices on the basis of his/her ability to weigh alternatives, which may be right or wrong, and this capacity

[2] In *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle states that political science, which includes ethics and politics, is a type of knowledge with a wide variety of opinions and uncertainties concerning what is right and just, but which may help individuals to make better decisions in complex cases and act in an appropriate and virtuous way. The truth is presented in an approximate form, and the concept of knowledge is intrinsically linked to the experience of agents and their disposition to act virtuously (Aristotle, 1999, 1094b 12-20).

[3] Rik Peels defines ignorance as a mental attitude in relation to a true belief. It can be viewed as (i) having a false belief, (ii) suspending judgment in relation to a true proposition, (iii) having no idea about a true proposition, or (iv) suspend judgment about a true proposition. Peels' position is more inclusive and seems to capture more neatly what is involved in the phenomenon of ignorance (Peels, 2010, pp. 62-64).

can be best interpreted as “knowing how” rather than “knowing that”, i.e. practical instead of the propositional knowledge. The achievement of virtue is therefore practice and a process of moving from ignorance to knowledge in stages, and not just in one fell swoop.

As regards the question of the meaning of knowledge and ignorance, I would like to point out what I consider to be a particular danger in Brennan’s proposition as described above. If political ignorance is indeed a reason for denying the right to vote, and if ignorance is equivalent to a lack of knowledge, or having false beliefs, then all voters would be denied the right to suffrage since it is impossible to verify what exactly knowledge is in this context. For example, someone who defends the government’s policy concerning the war on drugs is deemed to be ignorant, and therefore he/she should be denied the right to vote. On the other hand, defending the decriminalization or legalization of drugs is deemed to be a good example of political knowledge. But how is it possible to distinguish between what is identified as ignorance or knowledge in a domain which is surrounded by such a diversity of opinions, and corroded by uncertainty? Might such a distinction not be arbitrary? In fact, when we consider that we always make judgments based on cognitive biases and our own experiences, it becomes clear that this is almost certainly the case. By way of example, let us imagine a situation in which one person defends a Keynesian approach to obtaining prosperity, while another defends a radical neoliberal policy, which contains a large dose of privatization. Who is then to decide what constitutes knowledge or ignorance? According to Brennan, ignorant people should not be allowed to vote, but we must somehow make room for differences of opinion since it would be arbitrary to restrict some beliefs and not others.

In addition, this approach may be considered unjust if we consider the fact that the conditions necessary to achieve political knowledge are asymmetrical in societies with a high level of economic inequality. In Brennan's research, poor people, Black people, Latinos, and women are those with the highest rates of political ignorance, whereas white, rich, and educated men have the highest rates of political knowledge (Brennan, 2017, pp. 32-33). This is probably because the more deprived groups have not had access to a cognitively fertile environment, i.e., they have not been too good schools, nor have they had sufficient time to study or to be exposed to different kinds of cultural opportunities. It would therefore be unjust to restrict the voting rights of these groups since the asymmetrical conditions they must face are involuntary. Indeed, it would be much fairer if social structures were modified in order to provide equitable conditions for all citizens in relation to the cognitive environment.

Politics, choices, and plurality

Brennan claims that politics is not like a poem, and this means that its purpose must therefore be instrumental. Its value must be measured by the results it achieves, as it has no intrinsic worth and, because of this, epistocracy is preferable to democracy, since it offers a better guarantee for the wellbeing of citizens. This is obviously not an ideal perspective, since it tries to reflect those institutions which would work best in terms of people's real behavior, rather than asking which would be the best institutions to adopt if all citizens behaved in a rational and moral way. Brennan wants to know how we should view political participation and power in relation to citizens' moral and intellectual weaknesses (Brennan, 2017, p. 19). But he does not define clearly what he really means by "politics".

Since Brennan is making use of a theory that is not ideal, we may assume that he is employing a form of political realism when he adopts the idea of how people "really" behave as his starting point. This appears to be related to a certain skepticism about citizens' moral and intellectual capacity, as well as a belief that politics is in many ways merely a technique or a method, and that political knowledge is equivalent to having relevant information as a basis for making decisions. In this way, and in line with the examples given above, politics may be considered a type of science. As we have already seen, Brennan claims that most voters are ignorant and irrational when dealing with political facts and that they take decisions based on insufficient evidence. He also states, with reference to Caplan, that voters have little sociological and historical knowledge concerning political facts and very limited knowledge of economics. For example, most American voters do not know that the concept of free markets postulated by Adam Smith is superior to a mercantilist approach (Brennan, 2017, p. 29).

Brennan, therefore, believes that a wise political decision must be supported by adequate information and by relevant social theories to identify pertinent information. Questions remain, however, as to whether a political choice can, in fact, be reduced to a mere identification of factual evidence, and whether politics can really be considered a form of science.

It is important to note that if the choice is concerned with which economic system is the most efficient, i.e., free markets or mercantilism, I might agree that there is sufficient evidence to prove the superiority of the free markets. However, if the choice were between free markets *per se* or a system with a degree of state intervention (to avoid monopolies, for example), the relevant evidence and recognizable

facts would not be so clear. Experienced economists would themselves probably disagree on this subject. There would also be disagreement between those who support an economic policy based on the centrality of social welfare and those who defend a policy of minimal state intervention. Once again, we must ask what facts or relevant evidence should be considered by economic experts, and if their scientific opinions differ, it will obviously be far more difficult for ordinary voters to arrive at a suitable decision.

In addition to this reductionist view, which interprets political decisions as the neutral identification of certain facts which can readily be recognized by epistocratic voters, political choice throws up two major issues: that the value of choice is not merely instrumental, since it reveals the type of person who made it, and that this choice is also symbolic since it involves deliberating and deciding between different reasons about which there is a multitude of public doubts and disagreements. This seems to demonstrate that there are significant differences between the political and scientific domains, and their levels of certainty and clarity are quite distinct. We will now consider this in more detail.

Firstly, let us reflect on the value of making choices, which is something we do all the time in our daily lives. We choose people as friends, lovers, and partners, we choose what profession to follow, what films to watch, and what candidate from which political party to vote for. Furthermore, punishment can only be deemed just if we consider that the person who infringed the law knew that he/she had a choice of action. We, therefore, need to ask if the choices we make every day are merely instrumental, i.e., their value depends solely on the results they achieve. I do not think this is the case, since our choices are a symbol of our autonomy, of our capacity not to be

heteroregulated, and the concept of autonomy appears to be central to both our personal and social lives. If we imagine a society in which the state would decide what profession we accept or whom we should marry, even if that were to produce positive results (in the sense of having higher levels of productivity or fewer cases of divorce), it is extremely unlikely that it would be acceptable to most individuals. This is because we value our capacity for choice very highly and have built our social order on this premise, which would also appear to be true when we make political choices. I believe that when we choose a particular candidate in an election, that choice also reveals who we are, and which values are important to us.

In relation to this subject, Nozick (1990, p. 286) correctly states that the political power expressed through suffrage is a symbol of equal dignity and autonomy for all human beings. He emphasizes that our political choices, as represented by voting, are not only important for directing the attention of government towards specific areas such as health, education, or the economy, but also for symbolizing our capacity for self-direction, i.e., directing our actions and decisions without external interference (Nozick, 1990, p. 286). Everyone's opinion should have equal weight since otherwise we would lose our status as autonomous beings. Indeed, what would society be like if did lose this status, so that we could no longer consider ourselves as being self-governed?

Secondly, it is important to recognize the political concept of plurality, which posits that differences naturally exist between different citizens' views of the world, and not just ignorance and irrationality in the choice of policies or even of candidates for political office. In "The Domain of the Political and Overlapping Consensus" (1989), John Rawls reflects on exactly what constitutes the sphere of politics. According to Rawls, five general facts need to be recognized. The first of these is reasonable

pluralism, which states that the diversity of comprehensive doctrines (religious, moral, and philosophical) is not merely a historical contingency, but a permanent feature of the public culture of contemporary democracies. The second is the fact of oppression, which tells us that only the oppressive use of state power can maintain a continuing common affirmation of one comprehensive doctrine, as was the case with the Inquisition during the Middle Ages. The third fact informs us that a lasting democratic regime requires the free support of a substantial majority of politically active citizens who are not divided by conflicting doctrines or by social classes which are hostile to each other. The fourth fact states that the public culture of a relatively stable democratic society possesses certain intuitive ideas which are the basis for formulating a political concept of justice. The fifth fact is related to the burdens of reason and shows us that we use a number of our vital senses under conditions where it is unlikely that rational and reasonable people will arrive at the same conclusions after an open discussion (Rawls, 1999, pp. 474-475, 478). Even more importantly, when we analyze the characteristics of politics, we see that a political relationship is manifested between members of the same society (which we enter when we are born and leave only when we die). This implies differences between the sphere of association (which is voluntary) and the family and personal fields, which are affective in a way that is alien to politics. In short, politics is rooted in the public sphere and is involuntary; it cannot be reduced to the private sphere (Rawls, 1999, pp. 482-484).

Instead of considering the public domain as consisting of certain facts which are recognized by experts in their field, Rawls interprets it based on reasonable pluralism. This interpretation of politics views disagreements in a different way from Brennan, who sees them as the expression of prejudices, individual and intergroup interests,

blindness, overreaction, irrationality, and even stupidity, which seems to question the integrity of those who disagree with us. For Rawls, on the contrary, disagreements are seen in line with the complexity of empirical proofs, with the relative weight of pertinent considerations, the indeterminateness, and vagueness of concepts, and with the influence of life experiences in relation to values and proofs.[4]

The interpretation of the sources of disagreement is certainly relevant since it reveals the full complexity of politics. For Brennan, there is relevant evidence that must be identified by those possessing knowledge, and not recognizing this evidence would be synonymous with ignorance. For Rawls, on the other hand, the empirical evidence in relation to specific cases is complex and can be interpreted in many ways. For example, we can attribute different relative weights to evidence and thereby arrive at different conclusions. In addition, our subjective experiences appear to have a marked effect on how we evaluate a piece of evidence and its intrinsic values. Once again, we can imagine a discussion between someone who defends a policy based on social welfare and affirmative public action, and another person who defends a policy of minimal state intervention. I believe that Brennan would identify neutral evidence which would be accessed by experts in their field as a basis for their decisions. For Rawls, on the other hand, such evidence may be interpreted in different ways depending on the life experiences of those involved. For example, being black or female and having been subjected to a lifetime of racism or sexism may have a decisive

[4] For Rawls, the sources of reasonable disagreement are: (i) the empirical proof supporting a particular case may be contradictory and complex; (ii) we may differ about the relative weight of the type of consideration which is pertinent, and therefore arrive at different conclusions; (iii) all our concepts are, in a certain way, vague and indeterminate, including our moral and political concepts; (iv) our life experiences influence the way in which we evaluate a specific evidence as well as our moral and political values; (v) there are certain basic conflicts relating to values, in the sense that there appear to be normative reasons for particular incompatible actions which must be decided between; (vi) social institutions must select certain political and moral values and prioritise them (Rawls, 1999, pp. 476-477).

influence on how a person interprets evidence and its intrinsic values when defending a certain form of affirmative action such as a quota system. This might not be the case for someone who has never experienced prejudice. The problem with politics, therefore, is not only one of ignorance and irrationality but also of perspective.

The political domain is thus rendered more adequately not as a repository of neutral facts decided on by experts but as a public space containing people who profess different religious, moral, and economic doctrines, and who have distinct and sometimes contrary positions concerning how the problems of society should be resolved. In the light of this, it is very important to guarantee freedom and basic rights, especially the political rights to vote and run for office. If at the end of the day decisions are to be made according to the will of the majority, it would be presumptuous to restrict the political rights of certain citizens based on such an arbitrary criterion as ignorance (as proposed by Brennan), since it may be the case that what is in play is simply a collection of different opinions.

Prudence and civic friendship

Moving on from the discussion of the concepts of knowledge and ignorance, and of the political domain, the next step will be to reflect on the public virtues of prudence and civic friendship, especially in terms of how they are acquired. This is particularly relevant since, according to Brennan, political participation tends to favour stupidity and public antagonism.

For Brennan, political participation tends to have a corruptive influence instead of improving intellectual and moral character, and this creates a high degree of antagonism between voters. He begins the first chapter of *Against Democracy* by

making a comparison between Mill and Schumpeter. He says that Mill claims that political participation makes citizens more intelligent, more concerned with general welfare, and more educated and noble, with the result that people gain a wider perspective and cease thinking only of their own immediate interests. Schumpeter, on the other hand, claims that the average citizen has a poor understanding of political concepts, and focuses only on his/her personal interests, so his/her political participation is of a markedly primitive kind. He also claims that, in the current situation, most common forms of political engagement do not make people more educated but tend to make them more stupid and corrupt. Since they are not interested in politics and are ignorant of or completely irrational about many aspects of it, the solution is not to increase political participation but to restrict it (Brennan, 2017, pp. 1-3). In the last chapter of his book, he concludes that politics tends to make citizens hate each other and see members of opposing groups as their enemies, which clearly does not encourage civic friendship (Brennan, 2017, pp. 231-232).

Brennan's argument, therefore, seems to conclude that we should move away from politics, as it encourages stupidity, irrationality, and ignorance, whilst making citizens enemies of each other, and, since social stability is impossible without civic friendship, this means citizens being "engaged in a cooperative venture for mutual gain", thus avoiding "politics as much as possible" (Brennan, 2017, pp. 234-235). This argument seems to be related both to Brennan's all-or-nothing concept of political knowledge and to his concept of politics as a zero-sum game. As we noted above, however, if knowledge is considered as the expression of certain intellectual virtues which are acquired through experience until they become a habit, and if politics is considered as something which is not simply reducible to electoral disputes, but rather

as a way of achieving a basic normative consensus, then both political knowledge (which can be viewed as prudence or practical wisdom) and civic friendship will only be possible with political engagement and not with political restriction. This is because no virtue can be acquired without practice, and all public virtues can only be acquired within the political domain. It is extremely difficult to imagine a scenario in which public virtues, such as justice and tolerance, could be nurtured exclusively within the private sphere.

Rather than taking Schumpeter as our point of reference, let us consider the education argument that Mill puts forward as a means of understanding how political engagement can develop citizens' moral and intellectual virtues. Mill claims that political and civic activity requires citizens to make judgements based on an impartial view of their peers' interests, and the overall purpose of this is to achieve general wellbeing. This requires a long-term approach, together with engagement in issues related to morality and social science. As such, political activity will tend to augment civic virtues and make citizens better informed. Mill's argument emphasizes that political engagement will nurture their powers of critical thinking and increase their knowledge. He correctly claims that involvement in politics will lead them towards a more impartial perspective of the issues raised, so that they will have greater empathy with their peers and will develop a high level of concern in relation to general wellbeing (Mill, 1975, pp. 196-197).

Brennan's problem with Mill's education argument is that he needs to provide empirical data that political participation does, in fact, ennoble and educate citizens. Based on negative sociological data concerning deliberative democracy, together with psychological data relating to cognitive biases, Brennan concludes that the education

argument is not a solid one, and therefore political participation should be avoided (Brennan, 2017, pp. 60-73). The difficulty here is that this approach intends to describe the state of human nature and of social relations as something unalterable, and this constitutes a markedly essentialist view. Because of this, it is necessary to reflect on the specificity of the virtues concerned, as they may be considered as second nature, being acquired through a process of habit. In the remainder of this section, I will discuss the public virtues of prudence and civic friendship, which necessitate political engagement if they are to be acquired. I will begin by giving a definition of these virtues and analyze their level of importance, then reflect on the process of how they are acquired.

Prudence (*phronesis*) is defined in classical terms as the disposition to find adequate means to achieve a good outcome (Aristotle, 1999, 1143b21-25). It is seen as the capacity to deliberate successfully about what constitutes a good life. This implies a relationship with the capacity to learn which outcomes are good ones and, more specifically, a deliberative capacity to achieve successful results by choosing the best ways of reaching them. This would seem to be an essential virtue in the realm of politics since it generally implies identifying the necessary means for achieving a good outcome. If, for example, we consider that the aim of a particular state is to ensure the economic prosperity of its citizens, in addition to guaranteeing their security, it would not be prudent to adopt economic policies which exclude most citizens from benefits such as education, health, and employment. A prudent politician should be able to identify more easily social welfare policies, which are likely to achieve a positive outcome. It is not surprising that Aristotle considers Pericles to be the paradigm of a prudent politician. Pericles was very important in ensuring both peace and prosperity

in Athens because of his capacity to identify what constitutes public wellbeing, and this is a fundamental quality for governing well (Aristotle, 1999, 1140b1-2).

The importance of this quality from a public point of view is therefore clearly associated with the capacity to identify the means necessary for arriving at a good outcome. Many politicians desire peace and economic prosperity, but not all of them are able to identify the best ways of achieving these aims, i.e., to identify the most efficient public policies available. This is therefore an essential virtue for any public official, such as a legislator or a member of the executive. In addition, I believe that prudence is extremely important for the population at large. This is because the prudent citizen has less difficulty in assuming his/her responsibilities towards others and is capable of understanding the consequences of his/her actions, thus making it easier to accept civic obligations, such as respecting traffic regulations, following social, legal and political norms, as well as attributing equal weight to the interests of each individual, and showing good judgment in relation to public welfare.

Civic friendship (*politike philia*) is also a fundamental virtue for guaranteeing the integrity of societies and assisting in their welfare. It is a disposition, which involves the mutual concern for the virtuous nature of all citizens, and means wishing them well *per se*. As Aristotle states in *Politics*, civic friendship is a common aspiration regarding a standard of excellence for all citizens (Aristotle, 1995, 1295b1-3). Unlike personal friendship, intimate knowledge and emotional proximity are absent. As a result, behavioral features are expressed through the recognition of social norms regarding how people should treat each other, and this involves a knowledge of the national constitution and its qualities, the level of popular support in relation to what is publicly expected of social agents, and what their common duties should be. As

Schwarzenbach says, in contrast to personal friendship civic friendship is gained through a process of public education.[5]

From this definition of civic friendship, it becomes easier to see why it is so important. It can be considered a necessary condition for justice in a particular society since without civic friendship it is difficult to achieve social stability. This is because even if society has rules for justice that guarantee freedom, equality, and dignity for its citizens, without a disposition to desire the wellbeing of others and to share values, objectives, and a sense of justice, it is unlikely citizens will follow the rules of justice which make communal life possible. This is relevant even when we consider states which are currently liberal, and which make a clear distinction between the private and public spheres. Even Rawls, in his theory of justice as fairness, sees it as a necessary condition that citizens possess certain political virtues, such as a disposition to honour the duty of civility in order to ensure social stability for the right reasons. These virtues are considered a fundamental part of a particular society's political capital and depend both on the strength of social institutions and the efforts of citizens in their public coexistence (Rawls, 2001, pp. 115-119).[6]

We will next consider the process of acquisition of the public virtues of prudence and civic friendship. Citizens acquire these virtues via a process of habituation, in

[5] In her article "On Civic Friendship", Sibyl Scwarzenbach states that in a just society, citizens experience a form of mutual friendship which is different from personal friendship; they desire the wellbeing of others, they do important things for their peers, and they share values, objectives and a sense of justice which make communal life possible. Schwarzenbach defends the possibility of civic friendship in a liberal state, but this is not to be confused with so-called platonic community where everything is shared. On the contrary, it is a community where autonomy and privacy are preserved (Schwarzenbach, 1996, pp. 122-123).

[6] For Rawls, the political values of public reason reflect an ideal kind of citizenship, i.e., a disposition for dealing with fundamental political issues by considering citizens as free and equal agents who are both rational and reasonable. This ideal then leads to the duty of public civility, which directs citizens towards essential constitutional questions, as well as basic constitutional issues stemming from a limitation of the principle of legitimacy (Rawls, 2001, pp. 91-92).

which repeated practice forms the character of the individual so that it becomes second nature. Not even courage, moderation, or generosity are natural features of character but are acquired through a process of moving away from extremes. As regards courage, for example, one must relinquish temerity, which underestimates dangers, and cowardice, which overestimates them. This process starts with the predisposition of the individual and his aspiration to improve his/her character, but there is an important social role involved since the virtues are normative criteria, which are socially mediated. It is the specific group within a society, which applauds a certain kind of behavior but censures another. For example, the group may generally praise those who are courageous, moderate, and just, whilst blaming those who are cowardly, intemperate, egoistical, and unjust. We can therefore say that the acquisition of virtues is a collective undertaking.

Bearing this in mind, it becomes clear that the process of the acquisition of virtues will take place within the educational sphere, both inside the family and at school. It is also worth pointing out that, in addition to education, political and legal institutions are an important factor. Civic virtues owe much to those of public institutions within a particular society and, since they are just, it is very probable that citizens themselves will also become just. It is also apparent that political participation is relevant in the acquisition of the virtues referred to. If politics is considered as not being reducible to a single electoral dispute where there is always a winner and a loser, we may conclude that political participation stimulates the acquisition of both prudence and civic friendship.

Let us now consider the example of a constituent assembly, in which citizens can vote for legislators who will be given the task of creating a constitution. Once they

have been elected, these representatives will listen to the opinions of various members of society, such as business executives, teachers, shopkeepers, farmers, cattle ranchers, homeless or landless people, ecologists, and LGBT groups. Following on from these consultations, the legislators will form work groups, which will present the text of the constitution as it is being formulated. They will undoubtedly receive criticism, pressure, and praise until the final version of the constitution is published. It seems that popular participation in this process will encourage civic friendship since the final text of the constitution will be the central normative and political point of reference of the society whose involvement was essential. If certain citizens were not allowed to participate in this process, perhaps on the grounds of being ignorant and irrational, there would doubtlessly be strong feelings of resentment and anger against those officials who had decided to exclude them. This would bring about an asymmetrical situation, which would cause low self-esteem among those who had been disenfranchised and thus create civic enmity.

If we envisage an epistocratic society in which citizens do not elect legislators and members of the executive (just as judges are not elected in democratic states), and if we consider that the aforementioned public authorities have the same role as they do in modern democracies, i.e., making and applying laws, but instead of being elected, they should be selected via public competition. Even if we considered that these authorities were competent enough to guarantee the wellbeing of the whole population, most citizens would probably find it difficult to accept their suitability for carrying out everyday duties (i.e., political, and social responsibilities) without endangering the lives of their peers. How then can the virtue of prudence (i.e., practical wisdom) be acquired without political involvement? Since prudence has very special

characteristics as an intellectual virtue (something which is also a precondition for all the other intellectual and moral virtues), it appears that it can only be fully nurtured in the public domain, as the private sphere would not allow it to flourish completely. I believe that if Pericles had not been able to participate in politics, he would not have become a prudent agent who could identify a good outcome and the adequate means of achieving it for the common good.[7]

Conclusion

As we have discussed above, Brennan's conditional epistocratic argument, which proposes the restriction of the votes of those citizens who are considered politically irrational and ignorant, is based on a traditional conception of knowledge that is synonymous with justified true belief, whilst ignorance is equivalent to holding false beliefs, namely, that these false beliefs are not supported by adequate evidence. Furthermore, Brennan's conditional epistocratic argument understands politics as a zero-sum game, where the victory of one group means the defeat of another, which means taking citizens as agents who decide emotionally and in line with the perspective of their specific group or tribe.

In this last section of my paper, I will deal with what appears to be a certain presupposed essentialism in Brennan's theory, in that he considers human nature to be egoistical and irrational, with social relations mediated purely through self-interest. Since these relations are viewed as immutable, his logical conclusion is that it would be better to reduce political participation, rather than increase it. In the words of

[7] Tholen rightly states that political responsibility can be considered as a virtue which voters can learn and acquire. He also states that true political practice is realized by good and virtuous politicians who know how to deal with the conflicts which are typical of politics (Tholen, 2018, p. 31).

Buchanan, Brennan is assuming "the tribalism dogma" when he claims that the moral nature of human beings is indeed tribal (Buchanan, 2020, p. xv; 6-8). However, it is questionable whether human nature is, in fact, immutable. It would be more in line with recent discoveries in the field of neuroscience to see human mental capacities as flexible and adaptable. This could include both tribalism and inclusive morality, which can extend the altruism to take care of the members of other groups.

I will now discuss the phenomenon of moral progress in order to show that although tribalism may be present in our decisions (especially those which are political), from a historical point of view we are less tribalistic than in the past, and this indicates greater inclusivity in the circle of moral protection, or an "expansion of the circle of ethics", which could also be called an "inclusivist morality".[8] Moral progress, therefore, may be considered a form of evidence that although our cognitive biases are a part of our decision-making practices, they would not make it impossible to include other agents in our specific group, thus guaranteeing the same moral status for a class of individuals who were previously excluded, such as foreign nationals, members of other ethnic groups and genders, as well as non-human species of animal and even the natural world itself. Another way of viewing this issue is to recognize that moral progress provides evidence that the achievement of political knowledge is difficult but possible, as long as it is interpreted from a progressive perspective. In the

[8] This phenomenon signifies greater inclusion in the moral circle. In the case of hunter/gatherers, the protection afforded by care and reciprocity was restricted to members of a small group, and only these individuals would be safe from attack, while others would not be considered as equals, but more as a threat. Within the wider clan, certain members were subject to arbitrary treatment, and women were particularly discriminated against. With the passing of time, other groups were admitted to the clan, such as people of other ethnicities, women, non-human animals, and even the natural world itself. In other words, moral progress moves from tribalism towards a greater normative and ethical inclusivity. Singer, for example, explains this phenomenon as "an expansion of the ethical circle", whilst Buchanan and Powell interpret it as "an inclusivist morality" (Singer, 2011, pp. 111-124; Buchanan and Powell, 2018, pp. 62-66).

past, for example, both slavery and sexism were considered normal and morally correct, whereas nowadays they are considered unacceptable and are strongly censured in many societies. We shall now look in greater detail at a paradigmatic example of this type of progress, which is the universal recognition of human rights.

Soon after the end of the Second World War, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drawn up by legislative and cultural representatives from all over the world and was proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 10th, 1948, thus instituting normative protection for all members of the human species. In the Foreword, it states that it is necessary to recognize that the "(...) dignity inherent in all members of the human family and their inalienable equal rights is the cornerstone of freedom, justice, and peace in the world". It also states that this is "(...) fundamental to promoting the development of friendly relations between nations" and affirms that there is "(...) trust in fundamental human rights, in the dignity of human beings, and the equal rights of men and women". Its 30 articles ensure the rights to life, freedom, and security for all human beings, and condemn discrimination on the basis of race, gender, religion, or political belief. The Declaration also guarantees protection against torture, cruelty, and slavery, and defends the equality of all citizens before the law, together with the right to political asylum, and the right to work, education, and healthcare, *inter alia*. [9]

Before the establishment of the United Nations and the proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, war was the usual way of resolving conflicts between nations, and torture and attacks on civilian populations were frequently

[9] *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights,* https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights accessed on August 5th, 2020.

employed to obtain victory, while nationalism and patriotism were exalted globally. If we look back through history, we can see that even slavery was considered legitimate in defeating an enemy state. From an economic and political point of view, both colonialism and imperialism were deemed to be justifiable until relatively recently, and in relation to human rights, racial segregation was commonplace in countries such as South Africa and the United States. In more recent years, a process of expansion of the moral and political circle has begun in order to guarantee normative protection for citizens who have previously been excluded. Torture and cruelty have been banned in most countries, and both nationalism and patriotism have faced opposition in more cosmopolitan centers. Imperial colonies have ceased to exist, and both imperialism and segregation have been strongly blamed everywhere.

Having said this, it is important to remember that the social and political environment of the type of normative progress exemplified by the global recognition of human rights was instituted by representative liberal democracies. They are characterized by the decentralization of political power and, more specifically, by the limitation of the power of government in relation to citizens' rights, which implies respecting the various demands of groups within civil societies, thereby guaranteeing both individual and social autonomy. For example, without the guarantees of freedom of expression and association, it would have been difficult to abolish slavery, and it is less probable that women would have won the right to vote. Without an order of multiple hierarchies in which powers are clearly separated, especially in relation to the independence of the judiciary, it is also unlikely that racial segregation would have been ended. The right to private property and the institution of free markets incorporating social justice appear to have improved social mobility and to have increased the

economic inclusion of those left behind. Even more importantly, without democracy, which is based on the principle that all the different demands of civil society are legitimate ones, it is unlikely that gay people would have gained equality with other citizens or would have won protection against punishment for what used to be considered as a crime, while also guaranteeing the right to same-sex marriage and the adoption of children. Indeed, it could be claimed that representative liberal democracies are a necessary condition for moral progress.[10]

The point I wish to make here is that "tribalism" is not an impediment to normative inclusivity, since there is a demand for altruism both in international relations and in relations between citizens of each specific nation. I believe that although moral progress is neither linear nor necessary it may be considered as evidence of the flexibility of our deliberative moral capacities, thus allowing us to progressively reduce the arbitrariness of our moral and political judgments as we move towards ever greater altruism. I also believe that this progress may be interpreted as evidence that although political knowledge is complex and cannot be reduced to a neutral element, it should not be viewed as an all-or-nothing concept but as a question of the degree to which wisdom is achieved gradually. Since representative democracies have become over time the hegemonical social environment for the expansion of the ethical circle, I think that there is no conclusive reason to defend the restriction of

[10] Allen Buchanan also claims that a liberal democratic order is a necessary condition for large-scale moral progress. He emphasises the vital role which institutions play in achieving such progress, especially in defending the freedoms of expression, religion, and association, and he also stresses the importance of the decentralisation of political power. Further to this, he defends the hypothesis of the "epistemical social context" as another necessary condition for moral progress, and this context is characterised by: (i) dissemination of ideas through books, (ii) freedom of expression and association, (iii) recognition of cultural diversity, (iv) a culture of presenting reasons and justifications, (v) practising tolerance, and (vi) guaranteeing the rights of moral innovators (Buchanan, 2020, pp. 146-151).

political participation. On the contrary, it would probably be correct to assume that an increase in political participation would produce even more well-being and justice.

Bibliography

Anna, J. (2011) *Intelligent Virtue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Aristotle. (1999) *Nicomachean Ethics*. Transl. Terence Irwin. 2a. Ed. Indianapolis: Hackett.

Aristotle. (1995) *Politics.* Transl. Ernest Barker, revised by Richard Stalley. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brennan, J. (2017) *Against Democracy*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Buchanan, A. (2020) *Our Moral Fate: Evolution and the Escape from Tribalism*. Cambridge, MAS: The MIT Press.

Buchanan, A. and Powell, R. (2018) *The Evolution of Moral Progress: A Biocultural Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Chisholm, R. (1957) *Perceiving: A Philosophical Study*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Gettier, E. (1963) Is Justified True Belief Knowledge? *Analysis*, Vol. 23, No. 6, p. 121-123, 1963.

Mill, J. S. (1975) *Three Essays: On Liberty, Representative Government, and The Subjection of Women.* Edited by Richard Wollheim. New York: Oxford University Press.

Nozick, R. (1990) *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Peels, Rik. (1990) What is Ignorance? *Philosophia*, Vol. 38, p. 57-67.

Rawls, J. (1999) The Domain of the Political and Overlapping Consensus (1989). In: Rawls, J. *Collected Papers*. Edited by Samuel Freeman. Cambridge, MAS: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 473-496.

Rawls, J. (2001) *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement.* Edited by Erin Kelly. Cambridge, MAS: Harvard University Press.

Scwarzenbach, S. A. (1986) On Civic Friendship. *Ethics*, Vol. 107, No. 1, p. 97-128, 1996.

Singer, P. (2011) *The Expanding Circle: Ethics, Evolution, and Moral Progress*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Sosa, E. (2007) *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge*, Vol. I. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Tholen, B. (2018) Political Responsibility as Virtue: Nussbaum, MacIntyre, and Ricoeur on the Fragility of Politics. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, Vol. 43, No. 1, p. 22-34.

United Nations. (2020) *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (*UDHR*), 1948. Acesso em 05 de agosto de 2020. https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/