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Empathy, Rational Polarisation, and Epistemic Democracy

Overview
Broader interest – relationship of a) empathy and affective relationships & b) spatial design (both physical and virtual) to one other and to political goods.

How do these relate to epistemic democracy? Two common observations. i) often encounter others with beliefs so extreme we cannot rationally engage social media; ii) they seem to be clustered outside cities; dense urban areas more tolerant and home to more reasonable politics.

Many explanations. But if epistemic goals are promoted solely by *reasoning*, this is surprising! i) online interactions mostly text-based – easy to share information & arguments, lack of visual biases. ii) why should physical proximity have epistemic benefits?

Thesis: connection from 1. spatial design → 2. affective interpersonal affects → epistemic goods.

What is Epistemic Democracy?
(Broadly) instrumentalist justification: democracy good because → promotes epistemic goods. (Epistemic goods either intrinsically valuable or instrumental to further goods).

What features of democracy promote epistemic goods? a) some say *aggregation*; b) others say *deliberation*. I'm pursuing b).

What epistemic goods? Hannon distinguishes *veritistic* goods (true beliefs) from *understanding*. He argues that mutual understanding promoted by *empathy*.

> *Question*: does empathy promote veritistic goods? Hannon thinks we may pay a veritistic price to gain mutual understanding.

Broader instrumentalism: Spiekermann & Dietrich propose *generative democracy*: democratic institutions → democratic processes → intermediate goods (e.g. true beliefs, civic friendship, egalitarian attitudes, conceptual openness) → ultimate goods (e.g. social justice, flourishing).

> *Question*: Even if an intermediate good promotes an ultimate good *in isolation*, how do they interact? Do some intermediate goods hinder others (e.g. civic friendship vs truth)?

Question: Do empathy and affective relationships help or hinder veritistic epistemic goals?

Reason, Affect & Truth
Rationalism: epistemic goals promoted only by *reasoning*. Empathy & affective influences affect our beliefs, but are not ratiocinative; they are cognitive *biases*. a) an empathic relationship with someone who believes P is not evidence for P; b) empathy biased to in-groups.

From b) – worry that empathy promotes polarisation.

Should deliberative epistemic democrats accept *Rationalism*? Focus is *not* individual true belief, but epistemic goals promote via collective deliberation. Must discourse be purely ratiocinative?

Why do deliberative epistemic democrats worry about holders of extreme views (esp. if doxastic diversity is more important than individual accuracy)?
　　a) *affective polarisation* reduces willingness to engage in collective deliberation
　　b) *doxastic polarisation* makes collective reasoning impossible.

What is reasoning?
　　Ultra-Rationalism: reason gives direct access to truth.
　　Moderate Rationalism: reasoning involves inferences from existing beliefs; contingently truth-tracking. More plausible!

Given *Moderate Rationalism*, how does reasoning relate to polarisation & extreme beliefs? Much work on whether reasoning can *create* polarisation. More important: can reasoning *remove* people from extreme positions? Not always – may be subjectively rational to reject contrary evidence.

How can one escape an epistemic trap, where it is not subjectively rational to change view? Empathising with others creates *non-rational* doxastic influence (note extremists often converted by *friendship*, not *arguments*).

Claim: empathy may *reduce* accuracy for some, but *promote* preconditions for collective deliberation. If the latter is what matters, then may be collectively veritistically valuable.

Empathy & Spatial Design
What promotes empathy? 1) bias towards in-groups. 2) visual physical and facial cues. Strong empirical evidence for 2). Route 1) can promote polarisation, 2) can decrease it.

How does spatial design affect empathy? Social media spaces facilitate self-sorting (increasing 1), but remove live visual facial cues from non-allies (reducing 2).

Dense, diverse urban environments that encourage unplanned social mixing (what Jan Gehl calls "social-resultant activities) across demographic lines increase 2. Empirical evidence for positive political effects (eg tolerance) of dense & integrated urban environments.

Proposal: deliberative epistemic democrats should care more about the design of spaces where we conduct political discourse, and the way these spaces impact affective connections.

Hypothesis: deliberative epistemic democrats should a) want to promote forms of urbanisation that promote open social mixing b) worry about the way that political discourse on social media lacks empathic cues for socio-political out-groups.