

Symposium Prologue

SCOTT SCHEALL

Arizona State University

I am delighted for the chance to reply to the challenging and constructive comments of my friends and colleagues, Peter Boettke, Roger Koppl, Erwin Dekker, and Eric Schliesser, concerning my book, *F. A. Hayek and the Epistemology of Politics: The Curious Task of Economics*.¹ I would like to thank Bill Butos for his time and efforts in organizing this symposium.

It may help readers of this symposium who have yet to read the book to have a summary of its central arguments, before they engage with the comments of my critics.

In the first instance, the book is meant as a contribution to the philosophy of Austrian economics. However, the book has another ambition beyond this ostensible purpose, namely, to suggest the need to re-orient political inquiry around a unique conception of politicians as, in some ways and to some extent, *ignorant*. The standard conceptions of policymakers employed throughout the history of political analysis treat them as either *altruistic* or *knavish*, but always as *knowledgeable*.² Whether they are conceived as aiming to realize their constituents' ends or their own ends, politicians are assumed to always, somehow, *know enough to succeed*. The one significant exception to these standard conceptions can be found in the criticisms of the Austrian economists, especially Ludwig von Mises ([1920] 1935; [1922] 2009) and F. A. Hayek ([1935a] 1997; [1935b] 1997; [1940] 1997; [1945] 2014; [1975] 2014), of centrally-planned socialism and of other forms of interventionist economic policymaking. Mises and Hayek made no assumptions concerning the selfishness, self-interestedness, or moral probity of policymakers, but started instead from the assumption that it was an open question whether economic policymakers possessed the knowledge required to realize relevant policy goals. Mises and Hayek then provided reasons to think that, in the particular contexts of economic policymaking they considered, this open question could only be answered in the negative. In effect, *F. A. Hayek and the Epistemology of Politics* argues that the Austrian notion that politicians are not epistemically privileged and may well be epistemically deficient—that it is, at least, always an open question whether policymaker knowledge is adequate to some policy objective—makes a better starting assumption for political analysis than does the standard assumption that policymakers are somehow epistemically special, and should be adopted throughout political inquiry.

I argue that the reason it is advisable to amend the conceptions of policymakers assumed in political analysis concerns a fully general but little recognized fact about human decision-making: *the nature and extent of our ignorance concerning various courses of action serve to determine which*

courses of action appear to us as options worth consciously considering, and the degree to which we are initially motivated, or incited, to pursue them (Scheall and Crutchfield 2020). Human decision-making always moves from reflection (if perhaps only sub- or un-conscious reflection) on *what we know* to *what we ought to do* according to some normative (moral, prudential, pecuniary, etc.) criteria. This is the *logical priority of the epistemic*. Ignorance constrains decision-making.

I offer two arguments in the book (pp. 21-24; also see Scheall and Crutchfield 2020) for the logical priority of the epistemic.³

The first argument is introspective: reflection on our own thought processes reveals that the options that appear to us in consciousness rarely, if ever, encompass all of the courses of action that could be pursued in the relevant decision context. The options from which we choose in any given context have been filtered and ranked prior to reaching consciousness, seemingly, according to the relative weight of their comparative *epistemic burdens*, i.e., according to the nature and extent of the ignorance that must be overcome, of the knowledge that must still be *learned*, in order to deliberately pursue a course of action to its end. Courses of action that we take ourselves to be relatively more ignorant about either do not consciously appear to us as options or are ranked lower in our initial incentive structures below courses of action about which we take ourselves to be comparatively more knowledgeable.

The second argument for the logical priority of the epistemic concerns the meaning of the word “can” in principles like *ought implies can* and logically weaker variants.⁴ I do not take a position on the truth of *ought implies can* as opposed to one of these weaker alternatives. Rather, I argue that whatever the correct logical relationship between *ought* and *can*, if the correct principle is to be practically useful, the word “can” must mean *deliberately can*. But, “deliberately can” just means *knows enough to*. Thus, *ought implies* (or whatever) *knows enough to*.

If either of these arguments is sound, then decision-making proceeds from what is known (and is, therefore, constrained by what is *not* known, i.e., by ignorance) to what ought to be done in some moral, prudential, pecuniary or other normative sense, and not from normative considerations in isolation without prior epistemic, if perhaps only unconscious, evaluation.

That decision-making proceeds from what the subject knows to what the subject ought (in some sense) to do is an important element of any explanation why we survive, inasmuch as we do, in a complex world. We rarely, if ever, fail to pre-consciously reflect on relevant epistemic burdens, such that we afflict ourselves with obligations that we cannot fulfill without the intervention of luck, fortune, or other spontaneous forces. That we filter and pre-rank courses of action according to our relevant ignorance helps us avoid disasters personally and, by extension, evolutionarily.

However, in cases of *surrogate* decision-making, where someone decides on behalf and supposedly in the interests of someone else, we regularly saddle ourselves (and others) with purported obligations, without first considering whether related actions are within the supposed obligee’s ken and control (Crutchfield and Scheall 2019). The so-called obligations of surrogate decision-makers presuppose a condition that may not obtain, indeed, that probably rarely obtains, in surrogate settings, namely, that the surrogate *knows* what is in the interests of the surrogated and *knows how* to effect actions that promote these interests, or, otherwise, that the surrogate *knows* what the surrogated would decide, if they could. The alleged obligations of surrogates assume no gap—a gap that typically exists, in fact—between what the surrogate decision-maker knows and what the person surrogated knows about the latter’s interests, or would-be decisions.⁵ There is no mechanism, as there is in cases of personal decision-making (inasmuch as a person knows their own mental states), for avoiding disaster.

Of course, policymakers are surrogate decision-makers: they are expected to decide on behalf and in the interests of their constituents. This is true, in varying degrees, in all forms of government. Whether or not they actually do in practice, even autocrats are expected to look out for the interests of the people (and are frequently criticized when they do not). This is not to deny that history is chock-full of politicians who simply did not care about citizens. The point is that, even if they *had* cared, there is no obvious mechanism that could have provided them with the knowledge required to do so effectively. Even where the people are

supposed to be sovereign, voting mechanisms and other institutions of modern democracy provide but a pail reflection of the knowledge policymakers require to decide as good surrogates are supposed to decide (DeCanio 2014). There is no mechanism for avoiding disaster-*via*-ignorance in political decision-making.

The upshot of all of this for political inquiry is that the standard conceptions of policymakers as either altruistic or knavish put “the normative cart before the epistemic horse” (Scheall 2019, p. 43) that drives decision-making. Whether policymakers (and persons, more generally) are altruistic or knavish is not some brute fact. The *extent* to which people are altruistic or knavish is a function of their ignorance, *inter alia*. Where policymakers know everything that they need to know to realize goals associated with their constituents’ interests or demands, there is less scope for non-constituent-minded policy pursuits. Where policymakers are ignorant, in whole or in part, of knowledge necessary to realize their constituents’ interests or demands, it is easier—policymakers face a greater incentive—to *not* be constituent-minded.

What’s more, if policymakers recognize that they are ignorant of knowledge required to realize goals in their constituents’ interests or to satisfy constituents’ demands, if they recognize that such pursuits are likely to end with frustrated constituents, they are unlikely to even *try* to satisfy their constituents. Other things equal, such policymakers are likely to pursue other, less epistemically burdensome, less constituent-minded, goals. If policymakers understand that sincere pursuit of constituent-minded goals is likely to end in failure and recognize that they can accrue similar benefits by simply *pretending* to pursue constituent-minded goals, while incurring less weighty epistemic burdens, then they are more likely to engage in political playacting than to sincerely pursue constituent-minded goals.

Methodologically speaking, we can enrich political analysis by discarding the standard conceptions of policymakers drawn in unfalsifiable moralistic terms and by starting instead from a conception of policymakers as epistemically limited that, I argue, lends itself to empirical analysis. That is, we can ask what theoretical knowledge and empirical data policymakers would have to possess in order to deliberately realize various policy objectives. We can also investigate whether such theories and data are in fact available to policymakers.⁶ And we can ask about the consequences of a shortfall between the knowledge required and the knowledge available. In particular, we can ask whether there are any relevant spontaneous forces that might either provide the missing knowledge or otherwise compensate for the goal-defeating consequences of policymaker ignorance. Indeed, given that constituent-mindedness varies directly with policymaker knowledge (and inversely with policymaker ignorance), we can use what we learn through such analysis as a proxy for the question of policymakers’ altruistic *versus* knavish motivations. It is at this point that traditional approaches to political analysis, based on the standard conceptions of policymakers, properly qualified for policymaker ignorance, return to the fore.

Practically speaking, if we want to either avoid political disaster or just mitigate political failure, we should reason in politics more like we do in our personal lives. Before we start indiscriminately assigning obligations to policymakers to pursue various policy objectives, we should try to get some empirical purchase on the limits that policymaker ignorance places around what can be deliberately realized and, concomitantly, we should try to achieve greater understanding of the spontaneous forces required to realize goals when policymakers are to some degree ignorant of relevant knowledge. Any obligations attributed to policymakers ought to be things that are to some degree within their ken and control.

However, notice that this conclusion implies nothing about the particular policies that might be to some degree within (or without) the ken and control of relevant policymakers. It implies nothing about the political philosophies or systems that may or may not be deliberately realizable. In a world of expansive policymaker knowledge or in a world where relevant spontaneous forces operate effectively, more policy goals and political systems will be realizable than in a world of limited policymaker knowledge and anemic spontaneous forces. What kind of political-epistemological world we occupy at any given time and place is an empirical question, not one that can be answered *a priori* of the required analysis. Thus, in the absence of analysis based on the conception of policymakers as ignorant—analysis that the book recommends, but does not carry out—the book is officially agnostic about policy advice.

However, even if the results of such an analysis were in hand, nothing would follow directly about what ought to be done politically. I argue that ignorance is logically basic, not that it is the only consideration that matters, in human decision-making. Pre-conscious reflection on epistemic considerations comes before the application of moral, prudential, pecuniary, etc., considerations to a range of options, but these latter considerations are nevertheless critical to determining choice. As in a personal decision, in order to make a policy decision, it is still necessary to apply relevant normative criteria to the options that have survived the pre-conscious culling of courses of action. Thus, nothing like a defense of a particular political philosophy or policy recommendations can be inferred from the central argument of the book. Anyone who feigns to find advice in the book other than Humean skepticism in the absence of the suggested analysis is reading more normativity into the book than is implied by its central argument.

The first chapter ends with a taxonomy of ignorant policymakers and of the effects of various kinds of policymaker ignorance (pp. 27-29). Most of the first chapter considers policymakers *who know they are ignorant*, to some degree, with respect to some policy objective. Such policymakers confront an incentive, other things equal, to pursue other objectives. If policymakers take themselves to be ignorant with respect to constituent-minded policy goals, so much the worse for constituents, who will get less constituent-minded policymaking than if policymakers possessed more relevant knowledge. Policymakers might instead be *ignorant of their knowledge* with respect to some policy objective: they might not know that, in fact, they know enough to deliberately realize the objective. Such policymakers also face an ignorance-distorted incentive, *ceteris paribus*, to pursue other objectives, because they (mistakenly) believe that pursuing the relevant goal will end in failure, unless spontaneity intervenes. Hayek described policymakers who are *ignorant of their ignorance* with respect to some objective as suffering from a “pretence of knowledge”: they do not know enough to deliberately realize the goal, but mistakenly believe that they do know enough and, thus, they face an incentive to pursue the goal that they would not face, if they were better attuned to their actual deficient epistemic circumstances. Such policymakers are potentially dangerous: they are incited to pursue goals that they are too ignorant to achieve, the probable failure of which (without spontaneity) they are too ignorant to recognize. Only policymakers who *know that they know* enough to deliberately realize some objective do not confront ignorance-distorted incentives. The motivations, incentives, reasons, etc., of such “wise captains” of the ship of state cannot be distorted by ignorance, because they are neither first-order nor second-order ignorant.⁷ They know that they know.

That policymakers have been exclusively conceived as wise captains of the ship of state throughout the history of political analysis is implied by the fact that the distorting effects of ignorance on the motivations of policymakers (and humans more generally) have not been previously noted. Perhaps needless to say, there are no wise captains of the ship of state and the universal assumption that there are only wise captains has done little for the explanatory value of political analysis.⁸ The conception of policymakers as knowledgeable enough to realize their ends, whether altruistic or knavish, is the *deus ex machina* of existing political thought.

As compared to the complex argument of the first chapter, the arguments of the following five chapters of the book are relatively simply stated.

In the second chapter, I argue that the logical priority of the epistemic is implicit in the Austrians’ arguments against various forms of economic policymaking. The history of the development of Mises’ socialist-calculation argument and, especially, of Hayek’s arguments against market socialism and Keynesian demand management displays a gradual generalizing over time of the contexts to which they applied their political-epistemological analysis. I argue that the Austrians’ political-epistemological approach can be further extended to other policymaking contexts. Once we move away from wise-captain conceptions of policymakers, it is always an open question whether they possess the knowledge to deliberately realize some objective and what the consequences might be, if they do not. Indeed, it is always an open question about human action, in general, whether human actors possess the knowledge required to realize some end and what the consequences may be of their ignorance. The problem of policymaker ignorance is just an instance of a fully general *problem of ignorance*.

In the third chapter, I turn their political-epistemological approach against the Austrians. Given the generality of the problem of policymaker ignorance, it is an open question—which, I argue, Austrians have yet to answer—whether their own preference for liberalizing policies and political liberalism can be deliberately realized, and, if not, whether spontaneous forces exist adequate to overcome the consequences for liberalization of policymaker ignorance. I argue that policymakers are likely to confront heavy epistemic burdens in effectively liberalizing relatively illiberal and in sustaining existing liberal societies. Austrians (and liberals, more generally) have not shown either that these burdens are surmountable by epistemically-limited human policymakers (i.e., by unwise captains) or that, where policymakers are too ignorant to realize effective liberal states deliberately, spontaneous forces are likely to manifest such states.

Having established the problem of policymaker ignorance as the fundamental problem of political inquiry and its full generality across the political spectrum, I turn in the second part of the book to consider possible methods for both the analysis of the problem, in general and in particular policymaking contexts, and its possible eventual mitigation in the real world.

In Chapter Four, I consider the general epistemological underpinnings of a tenable political epistemology. I argue that, in order to promote intersubjective discussion about policymaker knowledge and ignorance, political epistemology must proceed as an empirical discipline and, therefore, that it must be founded on an empiricist general epistemology. I argue that Hayek’s own evolutionary empiricism—which makes knowledge *actionable belief*, i.e., the (explicit and tacit) ingredients of plans of action that can be deliberately realized—fits the required bill.⁹ I also argue that Mises’ epistemology, which I interpret as built on an unsound rationalistic apriorism, is not tenable as a general foundation for the future development of the Austrians’ political-epistemological approach.

In Chapter Five, I describe an “epistemic-mechanistic” method of analyzing (and, at least in principle, of mitigating) the effects of policymaker ignorance. We need mechanisms in politics that serve the epistemic function that prices serve in market economies. That is, we need mechanisms that provide signals to relevant actors, policymakers and constituents, that tell them *what to do* to adapt their plans to changes in politically-relevant circumstances. I also argue that allegedly democratic governments in which policymakers are ignorant of their constituents’ interests / demands, or are ignorant how to realize associated goals, fail to respect the principle of *popular sovereignty* and are, thus, at best, superficially democratic. Constituents are not sovereign where policymakers lack the knowledge that such sovereignty requires.

In the sixth and final chapter, I describe a “constitutional” approach to the problem that would empirically investigate policymakers’ knowledge and ignorance to determine what kinds of policy objectives are, and to what degree, within their ken and control. In principle at least, policymakers might then be constitutionally prohibited from pursuing objectives that, because of their relevant ignorance, they could not positively contribute to realizing. By limiting policymakers to the pursuit of goals with regard to which their knowledge was adequate, we would, in effect, make them *functionally* omnipotent and omniscient.¹⁰

My expectations for political-epistemological analysis are quite humble. The second part of the book is intentionally speculative about the future development of political-epistemological inquiry. The suggestions that I offer are mere suggestions. The main purpose of the book is to expose and analyze the problem of policymaker ignorance and its many detrimental, if heretofore unacknowledged, consequences. The book will have served this purpose if the problem of policymaker ignorance is finally recognized for what it is, the fundamental problem of political analysis and, indeed, of political life.

NOTES

- 1 The late Professor Gerald Gaus was scheduled to contribute an essay to the symposium. Alas, his untimely passing in the Summer of 2020 was a great loss for the worlds of political philosophy and Hayek studies, not to mention, for the present symposium.
- 2 The conception of policymakers as altruistic is rarely explicated, yet it has a long history in political thought. That (some) policymakers are altruistic or, at least, that some policymakers place their constituents' interests above their own personal interests is implicit in (many, if perhaps not all) arguments to the effect that the quality of political life hinges on identifying the *right kind of people* to serve as policymakers. Of course, the most famous such argument is found in Plato's (1991) *Republic*, the fount from which so much subsequent political thought flows. The conception of policymakers as knavish was explicated by David Hume in his "Of the Independency of Parliament." According to Hume ([1741, 1777, 1889] 1987, 44), "[p]olitical writers have established it as a maxim, that, in contriving any system of government, and fixing the several checks and controuls of the constitution, every man ought to be supposed a knave, and to have no other end, in all his actions, than private interest." The knavish conception of policymakers is maintained, at least implicitly, by those schools of thought (public choice and constitutional political economy, most famously) that look to Hume for inspiration.
- 3 Scott Scheall, *F. A. Hayek and the Epistemology of Politics: The Curious Task of Economics* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020). All references to the book are indicated by page numbers in parentheses.
- 4 Stuart Hampshire (1951) and R. M. Hare (1951, 1963) argue that *ought presupposes can*. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (1984) defends *ought conversationally implicates can*. For further references to other related literature, see Scheall and Crutchfield (2020, p. 5, fn. 8).
- 5 Inasmuch as individuals are fallible about their own mental states and, thus, about their own knowledge, interests, emotions, etc., it is possible for such a gap to emerge even in personal decision-making cases.
- 6 On my way of thinking, there is no need to "get inside the heads" of individual policymakers. Once we move away from a conception of policymakers as epistemically privileged, the relevant question is less what individual policymakers know than what theories and data are *publicly available*. Policymakers are not epistemically privileged. They do not have access to theories and data that are not, at least in principle, available to the rest of us.
- 7 I erroneously indicated in the book (p. 29) that Plato's wise captain or "true pilot" of the ship of state appears in Book IV, when, in fact, the wise captain is discussed in Book VI, of *The Republic*.
- 8 More carefully, no one is *always* a wise captain, as this implies true omnipotence and omniscience, but one might *occasionally* be a wise captain with regard to some particular (probably, only very simple) goals.
- 9 Hayek was a naturalist about epistemology. However, he accepted the use of mentalistic terms, such as "belief," in the absence of a full reduction of the mental to the physical (which he thought unlikely, if not impossible). Thus, for Hayek, "belief" is ultimately shorthand for some patterns of physical phenomena in the brain that we cannot, in the current state of scientific knowledge, detail more precisely. To re-state the point that knowledge is actionable belief in the terms of Hayek's ([1952] 2017) *The Sensory Order*, one knows inasmuch as the "models" derived from one's "map" of the world permit successful purposeful action.
- 10 The epistemic-mechanistic and constitutional methods might be combined. We might inquire into various mechanisms that could provide the signals to both policymakers and constituents that members of each class need to adapt their politically relevant plans, while also investigating the objectives that are, and to what degree, within the ken and control of policymakers.

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