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EPISTEMIC ARGUMENTS AGAINST DICTATORSHIP

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Abstract: In this article I examine what I term *epistemic arguments* against epistocratic dictatorships against the background of Harry Frankfurt's claim that truth is a fundamental governing notion, and some key reflections of Václav Havel and Leszek Kolakowski. Some of the key epistemic arguments offered by Karl Popper, Robert A. Dahl and Ross Harrison are outlined and endorsed. They underscore the insurmountable problems involved in choosing and maintaining a state of allegedly perfectly wise and efficient rulers. Such rule by virtue of supposed supreme knowledge and expertise denies a truthful recognition of the inevitable fallibility of the state, and of government policies. Moreover, the repression of both citizens' commitment to truthfulness and their attempts at political falsification will necessarily render dictatorships both continually prone to error and inevitably oppressive. Fallibilistic epistemology is thus seen as a formidable philosophical arsenal for anti-totalitarian and democratic thought, alongside ethical and historical arguments against dictatorship.

Keywords: epistemic arguments, epistocracy, truthfulness, dictatorship.

> *The organised lying practiced by totalitarian states is not, as is sometimes claimed, a temporary expedient of the same nature as military deception. It is something integral to totalitarianism, something that would continue even if concentration camps and secret police forces had ceased to be necessary* (Orwell, 2001).

I would like to begin my discussion with two examples that underline the fundamental value of truthfulness and knowledge in the face of dictatorship, drawn from the works of Leszek Kolakowski and Václav Havel. Both of these East European dissident intellectuals were forced to endure the Soviet bloc's repression of the citizen's right to make truth claims freely. The sheer volume of state propaganda and double-think of those regimes, defies the imagination. From the ludicrous forced confessions of the various party purges, to Lysenkoism, to the day to day petty distortions and official lies of Communist party functionaries, the Soviet bloc's contempt for truth became nothing short of a way of life encompassing millions of oppressed Europeans. One of the first casualties of tyranny is truthfulness and the search for optimal conditions and methods for knowledge acquisition.

That Havel and Kolakowski emerged as two of the most articulate anti-totalitarian thinkers of our time was due in part both to their commitment to the fundamental value of truthfulness on the part of citizens, as well as their rejection of illegitimate claims to exclusive knowledge and expertise on the part of dictatorial elites. Together, these two themes form the basis of what I here term *epistemic arguments* against dictatorship.

In *The Power of the Powerless* (Havel 1992, 132), Havel imagines a shopkeeper who, living under a communist dictatorship, places a sign reading "Workers of the world, unite!" purely out of obedience to state authority and fear of the consequences of not complying. Havel describes this action as a concealing of the degradation of the individual behind the mask of ideology. He writes, in a powerful passage that deserves quoting at length:

> Ideology is a specious way of relating to the world. It offers human beings the illusion of an identity, of dignity, and of morality while making it easier for them to part with them. As the repository of something suprapersonal and objective, it enables people to deceive their conscience and conceal their true position and their inglorious *modus vivendi*, both from the world and from themselves. ...It is a veil behind which human beings can hide their own fallen existence, their trivialization, and their adaptation to the status quo....the primary excusatory function of ideology, therefore, is to provide people, both as victims and pillars of the post-totalitarian system, with the illusion that the system is in harmony with the human order and the order of the universe (Havel 1992, 133-134).

Kolakowski relates an apposite anecdote from his own life in the Communist bloc (Kolakowski 1983, 130). In 1950, at the height of Zhdanovism in Stalin's USSR, he visited the Hermitage Museum in then Leningrad. A state museum guide explained the absence of works by the French Impressionists from the display gallery by stating that their "degenerate" character meant that they would only be suitable for display as a way of illustrating the depravity of Western bourgeois art. Some seven years later, a year after Khrushchev's secret speech on Stalin's crimes, the *same* guide brought Kolakowski and some friends into a room and stated with equanimity there was never any refusal on the museum's part to display such works. He claimed that this was a lie spread by "bourgeois journalists". Kolakowski was unsure whether this was an example of Orwellian doublethink, in which a person attempts to convince himself that a proposition is simultaneously both true and false, or whether it was simply an outright lie. In either case, the contempt for historical truth at work here is evident. A regime that defines itself as possessing unique access to truth and expertise, and represses constructive criticism in favour of strict conformity can only engender such behaviour.

In recent years, there has been much discussion of the value of truthfulness in philosophy e.g. Blackburn (2005), Frankfurt (2006), and Williams (2002). Largely a reaction to the culture wars that have raged in the academy for a generation now over postmodern relativism and its implications for science and literature, the question of truth's place has important implications for democratic politics as well. In particular, the question of why truth is a fundamental regulatory value and the reasons why it ought to be respected by both citizens and states are both of deep philosophical importance and a matter of civic responsibility and human rights. In the aftermath of the twentieth century's disastrous history of totalitarian lies, as well as dynamic democratisation movements speaking truth to power around the world today, democrats today have much to reflect upon. The value of truthfulness and legitimate

knowledge claims on the part of both governments and citizens ought to form an important part of that reflection. Not doing so will distort history and weaken the ongoing struggle against tyranny in many quarters, while encouraging the pressing problems of obfuscation, cynicism and apathy within democracies today.

The idea that truth is an inescapable practical value in human life, allowing for a reasonable place for interpretation and partial explanation, is central to much of the recent literature on truthfulness. For example, Harry Frankfurt writes:

> Any society that manages to be even minimally functional must have, it seems to me, a robust appreciation of the endless protean character of truth. After all, how could a society that cared too little for truth make sufficiently well-informed judgments and decisions concerning the most suitable disposition of its public business? How could it flourish, or even survive, without knowing enough about relevant facts to pursue its ambitions successfully and to cope prudently and effectively with its problems? (2006, 15-16).

The centrality of truth, and by extension, truthfulness, is here affirmed in a succinct and powerful manner. As Frankfurt claims, truth is not a mere *option* for us. It is what might be termed our most basic regulatory value, whatever our theoretical or rhetorical positions on its full meaning and implications. Without at least a working and practical sense of it, we could neither affirm nor deny anything, let alone construct bodies of knowledge in areas as diverse as science, history, and politics.

It is not merely the fact that the notion of truth imposes itself upon us for our countless day to day tasks and commonsensical judgements. Truth is the fulcrum of knowledge, and although we sometimes err in claiming that various things are the case, without due respect for affirming what we take to be the case and denying its obverse, we would be obliged to live in a world of massive error and distortion. We ought to recognise this and thus come to see the virtue of truthfulness as essential to regulating an efficient society that can learn from its mistakes. To do so is to grasp a core, albeit sometimes overlooked necessary condition for democracy. A democratic society ought to encourage its citizens to accept a critical role in its development and defence, as active participants in the search for the best possible order, one in keeping with their genuine interests and rights. Such an open society is thus justified by epistemic arguments as well as by likely better known ethical and historical arguments.

A society characterised by respect for truthfulness will uphold freedom of expression and the importance of rejecting falsified policies and ideologies. A key feature of both totalitarian and authoritarian dictatorships is the suppression of debate and the silencing of dissidents and clearly constructive critics. The former tend to do so ostensibly in the name of a utopian ideology, the latter for the maintenance of brute power, or sometimes in the name of tradition and authority.

The claim that the ruling elite of a dictatorship knows the nature of a supreme good better than the majority of its citizens ever could is at least as old as Plato's *Republic*. Both fascists and communists during the twentieth century made clear their utter contempt for the knowledge base and intelligence of their own oppressed subjects, and contemporary dictators are no more open to the falsification of their political and social beliefs. Epistemic arguments against dictatorship are thus of both historical and contemporary importance. Their key recent exponents include Robert A. Dahl and Ross Harrison, following in the footsteps

of Karl Popper. For the remainder of this short piece, I will limit myself to an analytical overview of some of their key criticisms of what Dahl has termed "guardianship", the general idea of a dictatorial epistocracy.

Karl Popper was the first twentieth century anti-totalitarian philosopher to make significant use of epistemic arguments against dictatorship. In the nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill presented an argument of considerable force for freedom of expression in his *On Liberty*, and John Milton's *Areopagitica* had begun the long defence of freedom of the press against censorship two centuries earlier. However, it was in response to the imminent threat during the Second World War to the very survival of democracy that Popper began to turn his attention to political questions. As a philosopher of science and a refugee from Nazism, he had both theoretical and practical reasons for opposing totalitarianism in favour of liberal freedom. *In the Open Society and its Enemies*, Popper traced the intellectual origins of twentieth century totalitarianism to both Plato in classical antiquity and to Hegel and Marx in the nineteenth century. Almost half a century later, in "Freedom and Intellectual Responsibility", Popper stressed the cognitive significance of democracy as a system for removing bad governments from power. He states (Popper 1997, 83):

> Every dictatorship is morally wrong. This is the basic moral principle for democracy, understood as the form of state in which the government can be removed without bloodshed. Dictatorship is morally wrong because it condemns the citizens of the state—against their better judgement and against their moral convictions—to collaborate with evil if only through their silence. It strips man of moral responsibility, without which he is only half, a hundredth of a man. It transforms any attempt to assume one's human responsibility into an attempted suicide.

The "moral responsibility" of which Popper speaks is linked in this essay to the accountability and consequent removability of democratically elected governments without violence. He sees both democracy, understood as a system of electoral government, and liberalism as anti-dictatorial systems, rather than as utopian plans for human perfection. Popper's general epistemology is fallibilist, in its combination of a repudiation of absolute claims to knowledge in favour of an emphasis on falsifiability and learning from mistakes. He rejected both holism and historicism. The former thesis claims that societies are real phenomena that transcend the sum total of their individual members, and the latter thesis claims that there are inevitable laws of history that can be mastered and applied in social engineering Popper (2001, 2003). Although originally applied to the philosophy of science, Popper's also held that his fallibilism rules out any dictatorship. Just as dogmatic scientists resist reasonable attempts to falsify their theories, so too do dictators resist legitimate dissent from their policies. Let us remember, however, that the stakes are higher in politics, where the penalty for dissent can be incarceration or execution. Better to be ostracised by a colleague than shot or sent to a concentration camp.

Throughout his work, Popper continually reminds us of the need for constant vigilance in the face of potential tyranny. It is significant that he maintains at various points in his writings that the values of truth and truthfulness are a key feature of that vigilance, and of democratic culture in general. When this emphasis is combined with his fallibilism, Popper's epistemology ought to be seen as a key ally to democratic thinking for our time. The same

choices between dogmatism and fallibilism, between tyranny and democracy are being made by individuals around the world today. The fact that the classical totalitarianism that was the object of Popper's original criticisms arguably exists only in that curious vestige of Stalinism, North Korea, does not diminish the value of his anti-dictatorial arguments. Indeed it is no coincidence that an important feature of the current debate about the future of Egypt, is concerned with whether an authoritarian tyranny will be replaced by a fundamentalist tyranny, as opposed to a democratic and open society. If Popper and his successors are right, then there are *both* epistemic and moral grounds for choosing the latter.

Robert A. Dahl and Ross Harrison's epistemic arguments for democracy contain both anti-dogmatic and instrumentalist claims. I take the former sort of argument to target exclusionary claims to knowledge, and the latter sort to make claims concerning the long-term effects upon society of dictatorial regimes. Like Popper, both Dahl and Harrison endorse fallibilism, the notion that the absolute knowledge generally sought by epistocracies is impossible to attain. All three authors emphasize that it is by learning from our mistakes that we can most accurately approximate truth.

Robert A. Dahl's critique of what he terms "guardianship" in Dahl [1989], and more concisely, in [2000] is one of the most cogent sets of arguments ever presented against epistocracy. For Dahl, such a system generally involves rule by experts or dictatorial technocrats, who may recognize equality of interest between citizens, but who nonetheless are held to be alone worthy of rule. Those regimes in which epistocracy is combined with a recognition of equality of interests would thus include communist totalitarian regimes in which the expert cadres of the party are designated as the sole legitimate rulers of a socialist society. Dahl also includes fascist totalitarian regimes in his definition Dahl (1989, 63). However, this inclusion is problematic, given that inequality of interests was stressed in the very ideology of avowedly fascistic governing elites.

Dahl's starting point is the first elaborations of epistocracy to be found in the works of Plato. The Platonic famous metaphor of the guardians of the ideal state found in *Republic*, in which Plato (1993, 488a-e) compares his guardians to a ship's captain is subjected to considerable criticism. I will focus here on Dahl [1989], Chapter Five, where several related epistemic arguments are elaborated. These arguments are developed in addition to a moral argument based upon the denial of the very possibility of creating in rulers the perfect and lasting virtue required for guardianship to work, as well as an appeal to the abysmal historical failures of all dictatorial regimes.

Plato claimed in *Republic* that after a careful process of selection and education, the rulers or guardians of his idea state would be the sole possessors of the political knowledge that could bring about the perfectibility of human society. Dahl questions the very possibility of such utopian knowledge as well as the claim that it should be reserved for an elite class of rulers Dahl (1989, Chapter Five). On the former claim, it rests upon an unfortunate identification of moral knowledge with what he terms "absolute" principles, comparable to those of natural science and mathematics. Dahl's scientistic criterion for ethical truth and knowledge claims is misleading, as I have argued at length elsewhere Litwack (2009, Chapter Eight, *passim*). For my present purposes, however, it will suffice to examine briefly some of the principal anti-dogmatic and anti-instrumentalist claims of both Dahl and Harrison, that *even if* moral knowledge is possible, this fact does not argue against democracy.

Dogmatic claims for epistocracy face several major obstacles, for Dahl. They imply, he holds, that only a minority of citizens are competent to rule, by analogy to skilled professionals. This is in keeping with Plato's analogy to the ship's captain. However, such claims run against the major problem that modern expertise is frequently devoid of ethical bearings, and the mere possession of valuable technical and administrative knowledge does not entail any wise conception of the general good. Furthermore, it is not even plausible that experts necessarily know better than the majority of citizens where their interests lie, and how to attain them. They are just better at solving precise problems requiring a high degree of specialized knowledge, and they are not even likely wiser than average in policy decisions involving the general challenges of risk assessment and trade-offs. Citizens possess greater autonomy and wisdom concerning their goals and goods than they are often given credit for, on Dahl's view.

Dahl furthermore claims that even a class of Guardians will need a decision procedure for public policy. He claims that if this should be some form of majority consensus, that this fact would argue for the general value of democracy. Here his argument is at its weakest. For it is surely possible, even if undesirable, that a kind of elite democracy would hold among the guardians themselves, in accordance with one plausible reading of Plato's original version of this system of government in *Republic*. The fact that the rulers of such a society might operate democratically *among themselves*, as equals, need not entail in and of itself that all of society should do so.

Dahl's claim concerning the limits to expertise points to the value of the intellectual virtue termed by Aristotle practical wisdom. Governing a society wisely and justly is not like building bridge or producing a better vaccine, on this view. It involves a capacity for sagacious reasoning with the goal of human flourishing well targeted in individual and policy decisions. Dahl is right to claim that the sort of reasoning required for running a society wisely and justly is not something that can be easily taught. It is rather something to be demonstrated by good governance in the face of general challenges, with the institutionalized possibility of electoral loss in cases where such wisdom has not been demonstrated to the satisfaction of a majority of the people whose interests it ought to promote.

Harrison (1993, Chapter Nine), makes similar claims to Dahl on the issue of the problems of epistocracy**.** He places greater stress than Dahl on the problems of elite selection for guardianship, which Plato thought were largely a matter of eugenics and careful education. He also rightly underlines the terrible ethical cost of dictatorship to society, in the form of massive rights violations and infringements on liberty. Both Dahl and Harrison follow Popper in stressing the value of fallibilism in epistemology, and the value of popular consultation through free elections in establishing and enacting policies towards the common good. I would wish to emphasize that an important aspect of popular consultation consists of citizens clarifying the general good as they see it through public deliberations, and correcting what they take to be errors in state policy without fear of state persecution. This is in keeping with the value of truthfulness. Speaking truth to power has both epistemic and ethical features, and both the valuing of truthfulness and fallibilism concerning state policy conjoin in the process of public deliberation.

Dahl urges us to address the problems of democratic society through democratic renewal rather than through epistocracy. He writes:

> …if the institutions for civic education are weak, only one satisfactory solution remains. They must be strengthened. We who believe in democratic goals are obliged to search for ways by which citizens can acquire the competence they need.
> Perhaps the institutions for civic education that were created in democratic countries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are no longer adequate. If this is so, then democratic countries will need to create new institutions to supplement old ones Dahl (2000, 80).

It is likely that the strongest possible rejoinder to the arguments made by Dahl and Harrison would be rooted in a questioning of their shared belief in the autonomy and general wisdom of the majority of people. In an era of mass voter apathy, historical ignorance and cynicism, it may sometimes seem tempting to think that H.L. Mencken was right in suggesting that no one ever went broke by underestimating the intelligence of the mass of people. However, this temptation must be resisted strongly. For it is certainly true that to choose epistocracy over Dahl's prescription of democratic renewal is to opt for arrogant dogmatism, rule by narrow specialists, and a major reduction in the possibilities for learning from our mistakes. When coupled with arguments from the abysmal historical record of modern dictatorships and the ethical arguments for human rights and against the corrupting effects of absolute power, the overall case for democracy remains decisive In the long run. Epistocracy is likely to generate far more serious problems than the ones it *may* solve, temporarily.

Furthermore, if the justification of a *temporary* epistocracy is based upon the claim that the state will either be voluntarily dissolved by the epistocrats after they have established utopia, or that it will wither away as a matter of historical necessity, then it is prey to all three types of anti-dictatorial argument. It will very likely not be as efficient as its proponents predict, for the epistemic reasons indicated above. It will, furthermore, be prey to the fatal moral argument on the corrupting influence of power upon both its holders and their successors. The historical type of argument also works against such claims, because of the countless empirical examples of brutal and failed dictatorships that were supported as temporary measures.

Let us recall Frankfurt's claim that a society that functions well and that is resilient and efficient in solving its problems will require a general respect for truth as part of its ethos. This claim is well-supported by epistemic arguments for democracy. An important part of that respect for truth will necessarily involve not only tolerating but encouraging a spirit of truthfulness on the part of its citizens, and a shunning of any anti-democratic notions of incorrigible dogma and elite knowledge.

To return now to Kolakowski's museum-goers and Havel's shopkeeper. Can epistemic arguments contribute significantly to their valuing of truthfulness? I believe that the answer is clearly *yes*. The epistemic arguments sketched above underline the importance of what Havel has termed "living in truth", of creating a genuinely democratic culture in which citizens can not only recall their governments through the electoral process, but are the active participants of an open society characterized by a wide range of human rights and freedoms. An important part of that form of life is the recognition that the pursuit of truth and knowledge ought to be seen not only as a core governing value in negotiating our day to day environment, but as an ideal for all citizens, in both culture and politics. Even if some of us do know better than others on important issues, that knowledge can never justify dictatorship.

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