

# **PUBLIC DISAGREEMENT ABOUT UNCONTROVERSIAL CONCLUSIONS OF SCIENCE IN THE LIGHT OF CULTURAL COGNITION THEORY MAKING THE CASE FOR CIVIC FRIENDSHIP AS A HYBRID EPISTEMIC AND MORAL VIRTUE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this article is to explore one of the possibilities of alleviating or countering problematic public disagreement about uncontroversial conclusions of science which is not in the domain of reasonable pluralism, i.e. those conclusions that are not controversial among the experts in the field. Using Dan Kahan's theory of cultural cognition to identify the dominant cause of the problem - epistemic group polarisation, I suggest that one of the rectifying strategies that could be employed is based on the account of hybrid epistemic and moral virtues, as conceived by Miranda Fricker. Civic friendship is suggested as such a hybrid virtue which in addition to its moral component, also has significant epistemic benefits in alleviating the problem of public disagreement of the kind described in this article.

## **KEYWORDS**

Civic friendship, hybrid virtues, cultural cognition, public disagreement, experts, group polarisation

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In this paper I investigate possibilities of weakening disagreement which exist in the political society about conclusions of science that are uncontroversial among scientists. Such disagreement is surely problematic; it is perceived as negative even from the perspective of the prominent political philosopher John Rawls who was particularly careful to respect pluralism in political decisions. Although his theory of legitimacy is inspired by respect to pluralism, he attributes the status of valid public reasons, that is, of reasons that all reasonable persons accept, to "the methods and conclusions of science when these are not controversial" (Rawls, 1996, p. 139).

My investigation is intended mainly as a contribution to theories about the role of experts in public decision-making and about hybrid epistemic-moral virtues. In my view, it is a worth-deserving attempt to explore how diminishing trust in experts stemming from disagreement and group polarization can be partly alleviated from the perspective of virtue epistemology. Virtue epistemology is a branch of epistemology which places intellectual (or epistemic) characteristics of an agent at the focus of epistemological investigation.

Disagreement in the wide society about uncontroversial conclusions of science is just a subset of disagreements in contemporary pluralistic societies. Some of the contested issues are normative, such as moral values and principles, politics or mutual obligations, others are descriptive, such as societal state of affairs or scientific conclusions, while third yet are somewhere in between. Disagreement about any of these issues might be reasonable and even epistemically or morally productive, but what is certainly problematic, even in the light of the theory of the leading theoretician of democratic legitimacy in conditions of pluralism John Rawls, is the level of scepticism existing towards what can be called uncontroversial conclusions of science (Rawls, 1996) and intensity of this disagreement. To be sure, I am aware of the fact that there can be, and there often is, disagreement in the scientific community on some issues. This happens when there are valid reasons on more than one side, and it is not possible to clearly adjudicate between them. This makes such situations cases of reasonable pluralism, and this fact has proper consequences (Baccarini, 2020). However, I do not debate such cases. I focus on cases when conclusions of science are not controversial among scientists, but nonetheless large parts of the political society are sceptical towards them. Such a situation is especially problematic if we consider the diminishing trust toward epistemic authorities or experts (Gauchat, 2012), often attributed to growing populism in Western democracies (Huber 2020; Kennedy, 2019).

What makes this matter more pressing is that the circumstances sometimes demand that a decision be made and/or an action be taken. In such instances, a path has to be chosen, and in democratic societies, citizens will of course have a large influence on which path that will be. If there is disagreement about uncontroversial scientific conclusions, then this certainly spells trouble for such societies and their decision-making. An obvious and currently most popular example of this is the issue of climate change and human effect on it. Even though scientists predominantly agree that the climate situation is worsening and that human activity is a large contributing factor to that (Cook et al., 2013, 2016), significant part of the public does not agree (YouGov international poll, 2019). This obviously influences the political decision-making and might result in insufficient or untimely actions for preventing extremely serious long-term consequences. If it is possible that the planet might become uninhabitable as a result of human action, then this issue quite clearly demonstrates the potential extreme dangers of distrust

towards science, those of its results which are uncontroversial, and expert advice. However, this is only one of many examples which show such dangerous gap between scientific consensus and divided public opinion, while there are also many other such instances (e.g. Larson et al., 2016; McFadden, 2016).

The challenge for the modern democratic societies, in this regard, is then to: 1) foster public trust towards “the methods and conclusions of science when these are not controversial”, or, as I indicate below in the paper, experts who can best provide the evidence and predictions about serious issues that societies are facing, and 2) enable the general public to achieve higher epistemic goals and be more equipped to engage with such complex issues. However, how exactly to reach these two valuable goals will very much depend on the diagnosis of the current situation, i.e. the explanation of why citizens currently disagree among themselves and with the experts about things on which scientific consensus exists. Many different explanations have been offered for this phenomenon; populist tendencies which weaken trust towards any kind of authority or expertism (Merkley, 2020), complexity of issues which modern societies face coupled with human cognitive and other limitations, or, as Rawls says, burdens of judgment (Bromme & Goldman, 2014), lack of proper communication from the side of the experts and scientists (Huber et al., 2019) or simply insufficiently effective education (Allchin, 2013). However, in this paper I attempt to build upon the theory of cultural cognition of Dan Kahan which finds the roots of disagreement about scientific facts in group polarization (Kahan, 2011). Based on this theory, I put forward the central claim of my paper that a certain moral and epistemic virtue needs to be fostered both at the individual and at the societal level in order to (at least partially) alleviate this situation. Specifically, this is the virtue of civic friendship, that I present as, partly, an epistemic virtue. My strategy here is inspired by Miranda Fricker’s theory of hybrid virtues (Fricker, 2007), further employed by Prijić-Samaržija (2018). In this way, I try to show that civic friendship as a virtue ought to play a much more prominent role in the current political and social debates. Indeed, it should be an achievement which society as a whole and individuals themselves will strongly strive for if they care for epistemic improvement.

In the paper I proceed as follows. Firstly, I present an overview of the theory of cultural cognition and analyse it, with specific focus on its implications for political theory and virtue epistemology. Secondly, I try to put forward a proposal about how a good strategy for countering the problematic factors leading to current predicament could be structured. I also claim that the virtue of civic friendship is a good candidate for a central focus of such a strategy. Thirdly, I defend the claim that this disposition is indeed an instance of virtue with an epistemic dimension. Resulting from all these arguments, I finally make the case for a stronger role of the virtue of civic friendship in modern democracies.

## 2. CAUSES OF DISAGREEMENT ABOUT SCIENTIFIC FACTS, MODELS AND PREDICTIONS

As a starting point of the analysis, it is important to make sense of the possible causes of such disagreement as described above, and how these causes relate to each other.

As this paper mainly explores implications of the theory of cultural cognition for epistemology, or more specifically, which characteristics can be recognised as epistemic virtues if we take this theory seriously, it is important to describe the main tenants of the theory of cultural cognition, as well as its relation to other potential causes of disagreement about scientific facts, models and predictions listed above.

Theory of cultural cognition basically posits that our epistemic attitudes have other purposes in addition to aiming for the truth. Most interestingly, one purpose of epistemic attitudes is to signal cultural or group belonging (Kahan, 2011). Therefore, when we assess persons as irrational for holding epistemically weak beliefs, it might be that this is only because we presuppose that the only measure of rationality is how close a belief is to truth or other epistemically valuable goals. Instead, following Lessig (1995), Kahan proposes assessing rationality on two levels - individual and group level.

Using an example of belief in human effect on climate change, he then shows how on the individual level, it might be perfectly rational for an agent to hold incorrect beliefs, i.e. to believe that no climate change is caused by humans. This can happen because certain beliefs such as this one have strong cultural or societal significance - they signal belonging. For this reason, if a person lives in a local society deeply against the notion of human caused climate change, on the individual level it would be more rational for them not to believe in it. This is so because as an individual, their effect on climate is quite weak, so whether their belief is correct or not bears little practical consequence. Being socially rejected or having their social standing diminished however, is a much larger and more tangible consequence. Therefore, if hypothetically an agent would weigh potential positive and negative consequences, it would be more rational for the person to choose holding incorrect beliefs (Kahan, 2011, pp. 11-13). Of course, such weighing is purely hypothetical, it does not actually occur, but the belief selection actually happens without the agent being aware of this, it happens on the automatic, subconscious level.

This explanation holds for the individual level. On the group level however, the situation changes. To the society as a whole it is extremely important to have epistemically correct beliefs because the society as a whole can indeed produce significant effects, for example, on climate. Therefore, Kahan says that we actually have a tragedy of the commons problem - on the individual level it is more rational for everyone to follow the group beliefs regardless of their correctness, while on the group level this will lead to worse outcomes for everyone and is therefore irrational (Ibid., pp. 10-14). It is crucial to note however, that in Kahan's theory this is only

applicable to those beliefs which are a strong marker of group belonging. If a belief or an issue does not possess this characteristic, then there will also be no costs for an agenda (not) adopting a certain belief, and there will consequently be no overriding external reasons for not holding true or correct beliefs.

The way that Kahan empirically supports his thesis is especially important for the central question of this paper, which is how to reduce disagreement about beliefs about which scientific consensus exists and reliable expertise is available. Most importantly, Kahan demonstrates how level of education (which is of course strongly associated with amount of available information and general scientific literacy) actually broadens disagreement about scientific facts (Kahan, 2015), which means that more educated people tend to contribute to the widening of disagreement, instead to its reduction. This can be especially worrying if we take into account how education is often prescribed as the solution to the above-described problem. The explanation lies in motivated cognition; highly educated people simply gain more epistemic resources, but how they will deploy those resources, however, is another question. Kahan concludes that the highly educated simply use the resources which they have (as opposed to those with less education) to defend the beliefs which they hold, to a significant degree, because of their group belonging (Ibid., p. 12). This is concurrent with the reasoning model of Jonathan Haidt, who says that we often think of our cognitive machinery using the metaphor of scientist – our cognition collects and interprets information, creates and tests models and finally develops and refines theories. However, says Haidt, it would be more suitable to think of our cognitive machinery using the metaphor of a lawyer – the conclusion is already there, now we need to defend it with as reliable evidence as possible (Haidt, 2013).

Returning to the central question of this paper, that is, how disagreement among citizens about scientific facts and consequent lack of trusts in experts can be reduced, theory of cultural cognition already shows that simply educating people more and up to a higher standard will not be sufficient. It also shows that lack of education on its own cannot be even an enabling reason for such disagreement.

Kahan, following his cultural cognition theory, puts forth an enhanced science communication as his main suggestion on how to improve the troublesome situation he describes. However, for him different elements of this communication are in focus, in comparison with the above-mentioned prescriptions – he considers it most important that scientists try to avoid any type of polarising group identification in their communication about science. One instance of this would be to avoid making policy recommendation following the reporting of scientific facts, which would diminish perception of group alignment (Kahan, 2011, p. 16).

Although improved science communication is certainly a valuable goal, I find that such a suggestion as a consequence of cultural cognition theory has significant problems. Firstly, it can be at odds with the important requirement from scientists

that they take a more prominent position in public life precisely by making (more) policy recommendation and providing guidance for our societies. Societal benefits of science stem from its application, so it makes sense to expect from those who best understand the matter to also at least suggest possible ways of using scientific advances.

More importantly however, I believe that Kahan has underestimated the deeper implications that his theory has for the normative account of societal epistemic attitudes. His suggestion about improving science communications seems to barely scratch the surface of the issue and indeed he himself seems unsure to what degree can the problem be alleviated (Ibid., pp. 15-16). This is likely so because for any societal problem we can have two different groups of strategies on how to deal with it. One type of strategy would be to remove the harmful cause, and in that way also remove the harmful effect. This can be called a rectifying type of strategy. Another type of strategy might admit that removing the cause is impossible or infeasible and instead aim for counteracting only the effect. This can be called a compensatory or mitigating type of strategy.

Of course, in the real world, it is often difficult to aim for the rectifying strategies, as many of contemporary problems are simply grounded in causes which are extremely difficult to eliminate or even alleviate. That is probably the reason why Kahan also goes for the compensatory suggestions when discussing possible improvements. However, it is still valuable to explore in which way a rectifying strategy could work, that is; what could lead to diminishing the effect of cultural cognition on the process through which citizens form, acquire and revise their beliefs. In the following part of the paper, I explore which civic virtues should be fostered as those conducive to weakening the effect of group belonging on cognition.

### 3. EPISTEMIC VIRTUES AND CULTURAL COGNITION

Central claim of this paper is that one of the ways to pursue a rectifying strategy for the situation in which (because of cultural cognition) citizens disagree about issues on which there is scientific consensus, is that certain virtues need to be fostered at the personal and societal level.

Before venturing into this line of argumentation however, it is perhaps necessary to explicate the background of these claims. This is because a challenge might be posed to such line of argumentation in the form of a question why cultural cognition theory, even if true, warrants supporting certain characteristics as epistemic virtues. It might be said that the fact that a person's beliefs even about purely factual issues are influenced by their group is nothing new; it has been well known since at least the middle of 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954). If people are regularly biased positively towards their own group's beliefs and negatively towards the opposing

groups beliefs, then there is no need to bring virtue epistemology into the picture – the question is just how to diminish the effect just like with any other cognitive bias we are vulnerable to.

This would however be a misinterpretation of what cultural cognition theory implies for epistemology. For present purposes, cultural cognition theory can be divided into three important elements: 1) empirical data analysis showing that the general public disagrees on certain issues and that level of education and scientific literacy do not diminish this disagreement, 2) the thesis that citizens holding such diverse beliefs are not irrational, they are actually rational at the individual level, and therefore we have a problem structurally similar to the tragedy of the commons, 3) implications of this theory on how science and science communication is conducted. Now we can see that the first element is what is already well established and analysed, but the innovative element with important implications for social epistemology is the second part. If persons are not actually irrational even when holding epistemically weaker beliefs, because these beliefs serve as group identity markers, then this cannot be treated as simply another instance of bias. If we look at some of the more famous types of biases, such as confirmation bias (tendency to form conclusions based on previous beliefs) (Nickerson, 1998) or different framing effects (tendency to choose options depending on the way they are presented) (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981), we can see that this is markedly different. In such instances, we can detect no rational aspect of these cognitive mechanisms nor the difference between individual and collective rationality, meaning that even if there were benefits of applying these biases, the question of their rationality would be simple weighing of positive and negative sides. On the other hand, the tendency to conform to and defend beliefs which are group identity markers is a type of bias which cannot be treated in this way. This difference can also be seen from a conditional perspective. If we imagined that biases such as confirmation bias and framing effects were to disappear, there would be no loss of function for anyone. If we, on the other hand, imagine that group conformity about beliefs as described by the cultural cognition theory were to disappear, we can see that there would be a loss of function in the sense that citizens would adopt beliefs of highest epistemic quality, but which might overall be harmful for them. It is precisely this that warrants further analysis from a normative perspective.

If the citizens are in fact not irrational at the personal level, in holding epistemically weaker beliefs, simplest example of which would be to hold untrue beliefs, then it remains to be answered what is the proper way of approaching this problem and diminishing disagreement about scientifically accepted claims. The central proposal here is that this worrying situation can be helped indirectly; by lowering the number and level of intensity of contexts in which it can be rational to hold epistemically weak beliefs because of societal factors. The way in which this can be achieved is signalled by the findings of the cultural cognition theory; only

beliefs which serve as group identity markers are subject to the mechanism of cultural cognition (Kahan, 2011). If fewer beliefs possessed this characteristic, then fewer beliefs would be in danger of being epistemically deficient because of overriding factors.

This requires a different arrangement of societal interactions and dispositions – it requires a disposition to treat beliefs and other epistemic states as social phenomena that are group-neutral, meaning that they are not to be used as “badges” of identification or so-called “shibboleth”. Such a suggestion might seem like just wishful thinking or another idealistic goal, but there are a couple of important points to be made in defence of the feasibility of this suggestion.

Firstly, it should be noted that almost anything which is socially salient (visible or easily detectable) can be used, and is often used, as group identity marker. Characteristics such as clothing, manner of speaking, political affiliation, religious beliefs are all often used as such markers (Greene 2013). There is nothing special about factual beliefs in this regard, nor is it intrinsic to them to serve as group identity markers, which means that it is realistically possible for beliefs not to have such a function. This can further be seen from the fact that it is in fact a very minor share of beliefs which serves for this purpose, while the majority of beliefs is not associated with any socio-political group. The point then, is to expand this second set of beliefs, and shrink or eliminate the first one. Going back to Kahan’s work on cultural cognition, this situation is nicely depicted in the following figures which show that there is no disagreement between different socio-political groups on certain issues, as opposed to the others which are being used as group identity markers.

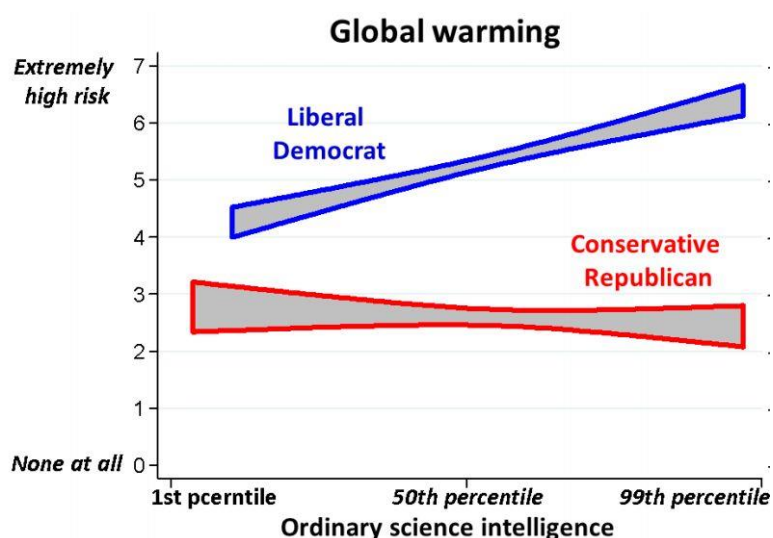


Figure 1: Issue salient in terms of group belonging (Kahan, 2015, p. 31)



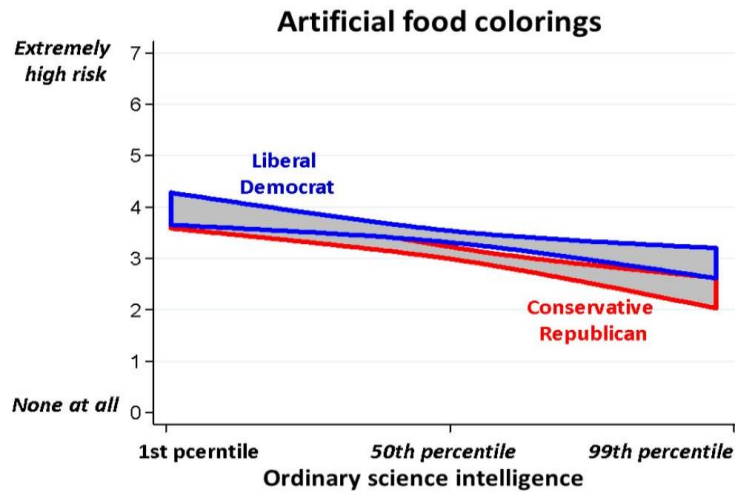


Figure 2: Issue not salient in terms of group belonging (Kahan, 2015, p. 31)

Secondly, which beliefs are used as group identity markers changes over time depending on the societal context, and less depending on the epistemic support or opposition to the belief itself. An example of this is the political division in the United States influencing beliefs about global warming, as can be seen in figure below:

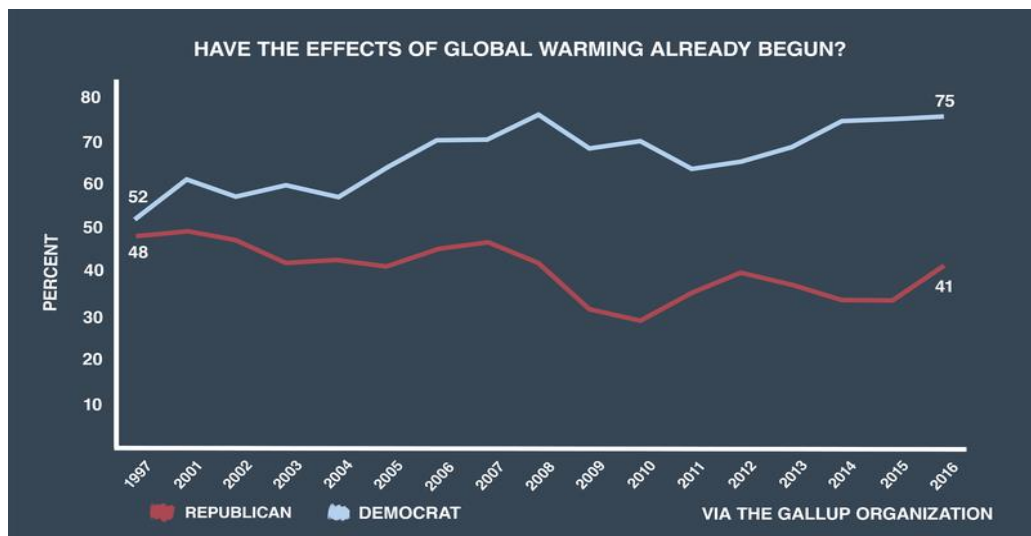


Figure 3: Difference in beliefs about climate change between political partisans (Couch, 2017)

As the graph clearly demonstrates, mere two decades ago beliefs about climate change were almost identical among two political groups but then started to diverge more and more. This is how a belief which was not a marker of group identity, because both groups in this example supported or opposed the belief to a similar

degree, has become such a marker. There are many interpretations on why this happened (e.g. Carmichael, Brulle & Huxster 2017; Kennedy, 2019), but regardless of the cause, an important point is that the status of beliefs in this regard can change over time, and if it changed in one direction as this example shows, then it is reasonable to assume that it can also shift in the opposite direction.

#### 4. EPISTEMIC AND HYBRID VIRTUE AS A RECTIFYING STRATEGY

If attempting to eliminate the status of group identity markers of some beliefs is a desirable and feasible rectifying strategy for the troubling situation in which citizens disagree about scientific facts and lack trust in experts, then what remains to be explored is which citizens' dispositions and characteristics could be helpful in achieving this goal.

There can probably be multiple such characteristics since human cognition and social interaction are so extremely complex, but I claim here that one of the best candidates is a disposition which is usually regarded as a moral or political virtue. This disposition is sometimes framed as civic friendship, tolerance or sense of societal "togetherness" (Quong, 2018) but what it fundamentally entails, at least for the present purposes, is not treating the other groups as enemies and as a threat but rather as groups of individuals with whom the most basic principles of communal life are shared. For the remainder of the paper, I will call this disposition "civic friendship" because I believe that this expression best captures the necessary sentiment, although there are many different characterisations of civic friendship present in literature and it is therefore important to have in mind the narrower definition I am using for the purpose of this argumentation.

Thus, my indication of the way out of the current epistemic predicament represented by denial of conclusions of science that are not controversial among scientists, is to foster a new relation in political society – a relation of civic friendship, instead of the antagonistic relations that cause epistemic group polarization. With this, I put forward a motivation to overcome such antagonistic relations; they are a clear threat to all because they foster an environment which makes it more difficult for citizens to achieve epistemic reasonableness. In the current situation, this risks to cause enormous harms to all, which should suffice as motivation for policies supportive of civic friendship, as well as for change in attitudes in society.

Civic friendship, understood in this way, would most likely be a candidate for being considered a political or moral virtue. It can be theorized that such a virtue would serve to solidify the basis of the community's constitution or that democratic societies especially need it because of the majoritarian aspects of democracy (Leland, 2019). Since the focus of this paper is not on moral or political values and virtues however, I will presently only assume that this disposition would indeed be

a political virtue since it would promote or lead to achievement of a certain political good.

Instead I want to make another claim here, which is that civic friendship is in fact also an epistemic virtue in the sense in which contemporary virtue epistemology defines such virtues as those characteristics which promote intellectual flourishing (Turri, Alfano & Greco, 2019). Obviously, there are many differences in various characterizations of epistemic virtues (e.g. Zagzebski 1996; Sosa, 2007), but my claim that civic friendship should be counted among them is compatible with any of the main camps in virtue epistemology, although it is perhaps more naturally inclined towards responsibilist accounts of epistemic virtue. In any case, civic friendship, as described above, can be considered an epistemic virtue primarily because it can lead to weakening and diminishing the number of beliefs used as group identity markers. In this way it can eliminate the tension between individual and group level rationality in holding these beliefs as Kahan describes, and therefore lead to better overall epistemic outcomes. What this would mean in practice is a certain “compartmentalisation of beliefs” through which beliefs would not be associated with a certain socio-political group, and in this way, they would lose the property of being a group identity marker.

Following Miranda Fricker’s account of hybrid virtues, which defines hybrid virtues as those characteristics which simultaneously aim at both moral and epistemic ideals (Fricker, 2007) and that of Prijić-Samaržija which defines these virtues as those that harmonise moral and epistemic goals (Prijić Samaržija, 2018), I further claim that civic friendship is precisely one of such virtues because it simultaneously leads to achievement of both political and epistemic goals. It promotes sense of togetherness and tolerance on the moral or political side of the virtue, while on the epistemic side it enables citizens to more reliably achieve correct beliefs by weakening the factors which lead to beliefs being culturally or socio-politically determined.

It might however be objected to this account that civic friendship is not an epistemic virtue because it intrinsically aims only at the moral or political ideals, while its effect on epistemic possibilities of citizens is secondary, accidental or contingent on specific societal circumstances. In this way, civic friendship could also not be a hybrid virtue since it does not satisfy the epistemic conditions.

It is probably true that epistemic and moral or political consequences of this virtue differ significantly, and indeed moral or political considerations are intrinsic, while epistemic considerations are extrinsic to such a set of person’s properties. However, it is not clear why that matters for the classification of what is epistemic (or hybrid) virtue. If we look at some of the examples of epistemic virtues, we will see that they behave similarly to civic friendship in this regard. Humility, for example, is a virtue which most likely will not refer exclusively or even primarily to cognition, yet it can very much be an intellectual or epistemic virtue because by

reducing the chance of overconfidence in personal beliefs, an agent is more likely to achieve correct beliefs (Whitcomb, 2015). Conscientiousness is another similar example. While it can play a large role in proper epistemic inquiry because it enables higher level of detail and consistent approach, it does not refer only to the epistemic domain of human life. Instead, it can be applied to many other areas at the very least equally. These examples show that for determining whether something is an epistemic virtue, it does not matter whether the characteristic in question intrinsically or necessarily aims at epistemic elements.

If what I propose here is true and civic friendship is indeed an epistemic virtue, and not only a moral virtue, then this gives contemporary political societies a much stronger reason to pursue policies which would proactively promote civic friendship in attempts to weaken the foundations of harmful epistemic group polarization which leads to, among other things, denial of uncontroversial scientific facts and lack of trust in experts. This might mean that much more attention needs to be dedicated to combating what is sometimes dubbed “hyper-partisanship” (Kaltenthaler & Miller, 2012) of the modern politics in attempts to prevent future phenomena as the one depicted in Figure 3. Of course, these are only tentative implications of the assertions presented in this paper, but what these claims at the very least entail is that civic friendship is a virtue which might bring about many other benefits, specifically in the domain of epistemology, in addition to the ones that are usually expected from it. Therefore, if my claims are correct, the political societies ought to promote this hybrid moral and epistemic virtue if they wish to enhance the epistemic achievements of their members. Strategies in which this can be done are surely numerous and context-dependent, but for the scope of this paper it suffices to say that this is indeed an extremely valuable and important societal goal.

Furthermore, the claims that I present here, taken all together also have implications on the personal level, in addition to the societal level described above. Faced with clear evidence about cognitive obstacles that we face and epistemic predicament that group polarization puts us in, all agents as individual have good reasons to revise their dispositional attitudes towards other citizens, especially those to whom they feel a certain animosity based on any kind of group or political identity. A conscientious cognizer should in such a case be aware that dispositions of good will towards those who we disagree with deeply will very likely result in better epistemic achievements for ourselves and better epistemic environment generally, at least if sufficient number of persons adopts such a stance.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Starting with the problem of citizens disagreement about issues on which scientific consensus exists, this paper tries to provide a suggestion on how to improve epistemic results of the general public and foster trust in scientists and

other experts so as to overcome the present problem. In this, I use Kahan's culture cognition theory as a framework, focusing on the theory's most relevant implications for social epistemology; firstly that people do not improve their cognitive results when they possess more intellectual resources if the issues at hand are group identity markers, and secondly, that this is not a manifestation of irrationality, but in fact rationality at the individual level (Kahan, 2011).

From this, I conclude that one feasible way out of this predicament is to try to eliminate or diminish this problematic property of certain beliefs that they are used as group identity markers. If these beliefs were not used for this purpose, then there would be no obstacles to simply adopting the most epistemically responsible attitude towards them. As a good candidate for a set of citizens' characteristics which might promote this goal, I suggest the virtue of civic friendship, defined more precisely as disposition to not treat different (and often opposing) socio-political groups as enemies and as a threat, but rather as groups of individuals with whom the most basic principles of communal life are shared. Such a virtue would promote a state in which beliefs would not serve as "badges of identification" for various groups.

If the virtue of civic friendship or civility can indeed produce these effects, I further claim that this makes it an epistemic virtue in so far as it promotes intellectual flourishing and achievement of best possible epistemic states. If we assume that civic friendship is also a moral or a political virtue, as it is often postulated, then this also makes it a proper case of a hybrid virtue consisting of both moral/political and epistemic elements (Fricker 2007; Prijić Samaržija, 2018).

Finally, I assert that this line of argumentation, if taken to its conclusion, gives a promising starting point for treating and researching civic friendship as one of the important civic virtues for modern democracies faced with significant challenges when it comes to epistemic achievements of its citizens. These reasons manifest themselves at the societal level, meaning that societies ought to promote and strengthen the values of civic friendship, and at the individual level, meaning that each agent individually has reasons to modify their dispositions in order to contribute to improving the overall epistemic environment.

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