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A Theory of Political Expertise **Alexander A. Guerrero**

Although a prominent question in ancient Greek political philosophy, the question of political expertise or political skill is one that has received little recent philosophical discussion—particularly outside of debates about exactly how to read and interpret Plato. This is unfortunate, as the idea of political expertise or skill relevant to politics continues to be prominent in popular discussions of political candidates, in empirical research relating to voter and political official competence, and, implicitly, in discussions of what have come to be called technocratic or epistocratic political systems.

In this chapter, I argue that although we can countenance many different notions of skill or expertise that are, in some sense, “political” or related to politics, we should distinguish between (1) *expert political analysts* and *exceptionally effective political actors*, and (2) *normative political experts* and *expert political actors*. It is the latter group who we should think of as possessing political expertise such that they might plausibly merit possessing political power, and it is this latter group that has been of philosophical interest historically.

In any agential domain, we can identify what counts as skill or expertise in that domain only after we have identified the *purpose(s)* or *function(s)* or *aim(s)* of action in that domain. This is necessary so that we can determine what constitutes success in that domain. I argue that in the political domain, the relevant purposes of political action are those relating to the *moral function(s)* of political institutions: the aims which, if achieved, would serve to morally justify and legitimate political action. On this view, possessing normative political expertise and being an expert political actor are a matter of knowing what ought to be done to achieve the legitimating purposes of political institutions, and acting skillfully so as to achieve those aims.

The view of political expertise that I defend in the chapter is, accordingly, contextualist and functionalist. Before saying what is required for political expertise, what an agent must be like to be a political expert, one must fix the institutional context and corresponding institutional roles, identify the legitimating purposes of action in that role, and then ask: what is required of an agent to be successful in acting to achieve those purposes?

I. The Political Expert as Expert Political Analyst

There is a way in which the question “are there political experts?” has a very boring answer. Yes, of course there are political experts. One can turn on the TV or the radio, or open a newspaper, and encounter all sorts of people brought in to opine on various things because they are political experts. Consider, for example, the professor and political commentator David Rebovich, discussed here in the New York Times:

“As far as who Mr. Rebovich is, you need look no further than the political pages of any newspaper or magazine in the state during a campaign. Turn on the television and it can seem as if his face has replaced the test pattern. When candidates begin making their pitch to voters, Mr. Rebovich, a 53-year-old political science professor at Rider University and avowed political addict, is nearly everywhere, analyzing and interpreting the shape of New Jersey politics.”¹

¹ Sullivan, J. (2002) “In Person; The Answer Man,” *The New York Times*, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/25/nyregion/in-person-the-answer-man.html>

Rebovich and others like him are experts on politics in that they have knowledge about the following kinds of things:

political systems and political rules: the details of political systems and processes, including rules of particular legislatures, parliamentary procedures, constitutional structures, and so on

political history: the history of political systems and institutions, political actors, and particular political decisions

descriptive political science: the relationships between various political institutions, actions, structures, demographic factors, and political outcomes, and the ways in which these are correlated with or causally related to each other

political psychology and political communication: the way in which political agents (citizens, voters, representatives, other political actors) are inclined to behave, feel, respond, interpret, and form beliefs in response to various events, policies, rules, structures, and so on

This knowledge might be more or less general, focused on, say, just 21st century New Jersey, or all of the United States, or all modern industrial democracies. And it might be more or less integrated into more general theories of psychology, history, law, sociology, economics, and so on.

Of course, there are also purported political experts who are not actually experts, because they do not actually possess knowledge about the political topics on which they teach or opine. But there will at least be a significant category of people who have engaged in extended research and study of topics such as these, whether in an academic setting or not, and who can be considered political experts in a fairly natural sense. Let us refer to this kind of political expert as an *expert political analyst*.

There are different ways of conceptualizing this kind of expert whose expertise is based on propositional knowledge. In general terms, we can say that an expert analyst in domain D is someone who:

- (EA1) possesses a high absolute level of propositional knowledge regarding topics in D ;
- (EA2) is more able and more likely to answer a question in domain D correctly than people in the general population, and both this ability and likelihood is because of the propositional knowledge they possess;
- (EA3) is able to identify considerations that are relevant to answering a question in D , even when they answer a question incorrectly; and
- (EA4) is able to deploy methods in the future that will help develop answers to, or understanding of, other questions within D .

These are not necessary and sufficient conditions for being an expert analyst; rather, the better that a person does with respect to each of (EA1)-(EA4), the more of an expert analyst they are with respect to D . And the broader D is, the broader the expertise of the analyst in question. Note that this conception of expertise includes both an absolute and a population relative dimension. We can countenance expert analysts that satisfy (EA1) but not (EA2): perhaps everyone in the population is excellent at answering questions in some domain. And there might be expert analysts who are experts because they can get 45% of the questions in some domain right, while no one else in the

population can correctly answer any of the questions, even though they still get more than half the questions wrong.

Many kinds of expert analysts will be relevant to political decisionmaking, even though their domain of expertise is not politics. Modern policymaking is incredibly technical and complex. Making law and policy in an epistemically responsible way requires drawing on expertise on a wide range of topics, basically the whole span of areas over which we do or might make law and policy: agriculture and food safety, telecommunications, immigration, education, taxation, energy policy, and so on. These expert analysts are not political experts, but they will be relevant to the discussion later.

It is natural to feel that this sense of political expert—political expert as expert political analyst—is uncontroversial, but also uninteresting. Even leading expert political analysts in this sense end up with rather narrow domains of expertise. And those who end up counting uncontroversially as expert political analysts also seem to lack any pro tanto claim to political authority or to it being a good idea to give them political power. There is something that this kind of expert seems to be lacking. Here's a hypothesis about what that thing is: expertise about what ought to be done, politically; expertise about what we as a political community ought to be doing, and how we ought to go about doing it.

Of course, on the understanding of expert political analyst offered above, we might simply take *D* to be the domain of *what ought to be done, politically*. Call this kind of expert political analyst a *normative political expert*. A normative political expert—an expert political analyst about this domain—is much closer to being a political expert in the sense of being an *expert political actor*. And it might seem more plausible that, *if* there were normative political experts, then it might be a good idea to give them political power, or more power and influence. But it will also be more controversial whether there are normative political experts.

II. The Political Expert as Normative Political Expert or Expert Political Actor

The political domain is an agential domain: there are many things that one might *do* in the political domain. It is not a purely theoretical domain. That means that there are questions of what one *ought* to do, questions of what *ought to be done*, and questions about how to be *skillful* in doing whatever it is that ought to be done.

As noted above, we can call someone who does well at knowing what ought to be done in the political domain, in the (EA1)-(EA4) sense identified above, a *normative political expert*. Call someone who is particularly skilled in doing what ought to be done in the political domain an *expert political actor*. Obviously, an individual might be both a normative political expert and an expert political actor. We might even think that being an expert political actor requires or presupposes that one is also a normative political expert. But let us take up that question in a moment.

Are there normative political experts and expert political actors? What would such people look like? In any agential domain, we can only identify what counts as skill in that domain after we have identified the *purpose(s)* or *function(s)* or *aim(s)* of action in that domain, so that we can determine what constitutes success in that domain. This is a general claim about skill, but one that has perhaps been overlooked in discussions of political expertise. A suggestion: most disagreements about the possibility of normative political experts and expert political actors stem from disagreement about the function or point of politics or of action in the political domain.

Some agential domains are relatively monolithic in the purpose that agents pursue in those domains, focused on one end. Other agential domains are pluralistic, including several or even many dimensions of potential achievement or success. Consider the domain of artmaking. An agent might create art as a means of self-expression, to engage and affect a real or potential audience, to support herself financially, to process a difficult experience, to communicate an idea, to represent some aspect of reality, and so on. It may be a matter of controversy which of any of these

purposes should be associated with being an expert or skilled artist. But these are all purposes for which agents engage in the creation of art.

In the case of political action, the questions of purpose and success are complicated by ways in which the political domain is itself complex and multifarious, making attempts at general claims about expertise or success in acting in “the political domain” like attempts at general claims about expertise or success in “game-playing,” or “artmaking” or some other large and variegated domain of action. We might be able to say something at this level of generality, but it won’t be anything very interesting. Accordingly, it is worth trying to be more specific regarding the different subdomains of the political, so that we might be able to offer more interesting suggestions regarding normative political expertise and expert political action.

There are at least three significant dimensions of variance that affect what we might say about “action in the political domain” and the various purposes and success conditions of that action. First, there are institutional differences: which political institutions and practices exist in particular places and times differ, making possible different kinds of actions within the domain of the political. Second, there are role differences: even given an institutional setting, agents may occupy very different roles within the broader political structures, giving rise to different potential actions and different conditions for successful action. Third, there are functional differences: political institutions and roles within those institutions exist to achieve different kinds of purposes, so that different background sociopolitical contexts call for different conditions of political success. Let me say more about each of these, beginning with the last.

A. Functionalism

Elsewhere, I have argued for what I call “institutional functionalism”:

Political and legal institutions are only instrumentally or functionally valuable—they are tools that can be used to address various practical problems of moral significance that arise when certain kinds of creatures live in relative proximity to each other (e.g., problems of scarcity, ignorance, disagreement, conflict, irrationality, prejudice, and so on).²

This functionalist view of political institutions leads to contextualist, non-universalist commitments about what the proper purposes of politics are and what political institutions should be in place in a particular community. Different problems may arise for different communities, and so different tools—different political and legal systems—may be required, depending on the particulars of the problems that arise and the particulars of the relevant community. To say anything about what success in the political domain might look like, and to thereby have an account of what kind of person might count as an expert in bringing it about, we first need to say more about the political problems relevant for a given society and the corresponding potential functions of political institutions in that society. Once we have in mind some list of this sort, we can see how it might recommend various kinds of political and legal institutions, which in turn will include specific roles for political actors and opportunities for political action, which in turn will generate specific results regarding whether there is normative political expertise or whether there are expert political actors, and what either of those things might look like.

B. Institutional and Role-Based Context

² Guerrero, A. (2017) “Political Functionalism and the Importance of Social Facts,” in K. Vallier and M. Weber (eds.) *Political Utopias*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

As mentioned above, differences of political function were only one of the variables relevant to assessing normative political expertise and the possibility of expert political actors. Along with that, there is also variability introduced by the specific political institutions that exist and the different roles that individuals do or might occupy within those institutions. Consider, for example, the way in which expert political action might differ depending on which of the existing political institutional arrangements (and corresponding set of political roles) is in place:

Electoral Representative Constitutional Democracy: a political system like that in the contemporary United States, in which there are citizens, elected representatives, an elected executive, an entrenched constitution, and a constitutional court, along with “secondary” political actors (who are in various ways hired/appointed and managed by the primary political actors): police officers, prosecutors, lawyers, judges, administrative agency bureaucrats, executive branch cabinet, military officers, and so on.

Direct Democracy: a political system like the above, except without elected representatives or an elected executive, in which citizens play a direct role in deciding law and policy—perhaps choosing to authorize and employ a similar panoply of secondary political actors.

Lottocracy: a political system in which ordinary citizens are randomly selected to serve on one of thirty different single-issue (e.g. education, transportation, immigration, etc.) legislative bodies.³ Those randomly selected to serve on one of these bodies hear from experts, activists, and stakeholders during a Learning Phase, engage in community consultation with the broader citizenry, spend time deliberating and discussing with each other, and eventually vote to enact law and policy. There would be a legal and constitutional structure similar to that in most modern electoral representative systems, absent an elected executive, but with legislatively controlled administrative agencies, a constitutional court, prosecutors, police officers, lawyers, judges, and so on.

Totalitarian Authoritarianism: a political system in which there is only one political party, no substantive electoral competition, and in which the State is run through a combination of a President/Dictator, Executive Cabinet, and leading Party Officials and Party Representatives none of whom were elected in substantively competitive elections. To maintain control and stability, this kind of system employs extensive networks of secret police; neighborhood/community spying organizations; state control of the economic sector; extensive repression of freedom of speech, religion, and association through official monitoring and censorship; and widespread use of political prison and detention.

As should be clear, there are different roles within each of these institutional systems, and different potential purposes. The central suggestion is that these differences—of function, institution, and role—affect the details of what counts as success in acting in these domains and what might be required to achieve it. Just as we would expect different abilities, skills, and competencies to be relevant for whether one is expert at the “games” of chess, cricket, crossword-puzzle solving, marathon-running, and competitive powerlifting, so, too, we should expect different abilities and

³ For further discussion, see Guerrero, A. (2014) “Against Elections: The Lottocratic Alternative,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 42, 135-178.

skills to be relevant for whether one is expert at “politics” in these different institutional settings and roles, aiming at one or several of these different functional purposes of politics.

One might be a citizen in a direct democracy, an elected representative, a judge on a constitutional court, a bureaucrat in a technocratic administrative agency, a president, a citizen-member of a lottocratic legislature, a prosecutor in a totalitarian state, and so on. Given this wide variance in political institutions and political roles within those institutions, as well as the background functions or purposes of political institutions, it is unsurprising that there is no simple, uniform account of what is required to be a normative political expert or an expert political actor—just as we wouldn’t expect there to be a simple, uniform account of what is required to be an expert game player for all of the aforementioned games. There might be some common factors, but the list of these would be far from a comprehensive account of what is required. And there might not even be any common factors.

To say more, we will need to do more to specify the institutional and role context, as well as the background functional purpose. Prior to that, however, there is one additional question that must be addressed: the question of how to understand the connection between political function or purpose and what might be morally or normatively significant about political expertise.

C. Normative Functionalism

There are at least three different levels of functional assessment or assessment regarding the purposes of artifactual entities (including objects, but also institutions and social practices): actual purpose(s), intended purpose(s), and normatively significant purpose(s). In the political case, we can call these the *de facto*, *de jure*, and *normatively legitimating* functions or purposes.

The *de facto* or actual function is what the artifactual entity actually accomplishes (brings about, causes) in the world. The *de jure* or intended function is what the artifactual entity was created or invented to accomplish (bring about, cause). The *normatively legitimating* function is what morally justifies the creation and existence of the artifactual entity (if it requires or has such a justification).

These can all be the same, in cases in which the artifactual entity is functioning well and functioning as designed. But they can also come apart. For example, perhaps the *de facto* purpose of political system X is to ensure that the wealthy elite maintain their socioeconomic power and are maximally well-off, but the *de jure* purpose (as inscribed in the constitution of system X) is to promote the well-being of the majority of the citizens of X. And we can suppose further that the only *legitimating* purpose of system X would be to promote the equality and well-being of all members of the society.

Which of these is the purpose that is connected to being either a normative political expert or an expert political actor? Recall that, just as a matter of terminology, being a normative political expert was defined in terms of knowing what *ought* to be done in the political domain, and being an expert political actor was defined as being particularly skilled in doing what *ought* to be done in the political domain. Accordingly, then, the most natural thought is that the purpose or function of the political system that matters are just those that matter from a normative vantage point: those that serve to make certain political actions and political institutions legitimate, morally permissible, morally justified, or even morally required.

There might be other potential or actual functions of political institutions—functions other than those that serve to legitimate the existence and actions of those institutions. For example, political institutions might be used to bring about the personal enrichment of those occupying certain offices. Or they might be used by members of a certain racial group to maintain power and domination over others. They might be used by leaders of corporations or industries to create favorable economic and legal conditions for the success of those corporations or industries. Let us suppose that none of these things are connected to the legitimating function of political institutions.

Regarding those people who are excellent at acting within these institutions so as to achieve these aims and other possible non-legitimizing functions of political institutions, we don't want to say that they are either normative political experts or expert political actors, at least not in the sense of being particularly skilled at doing what ought to be done in the political domain. But there is a sense in which they have a kind of skill or expertise. Let us refer to these people as *expertly effective political actors*. They are effective at getting things done through the system, accomplishing what they want by use of the existing political institutions.

One reason that people may have been dubious that "political experts" should rule is that they have been thinking either of political experts either as the mundane *expert political analysts* discussed in the first section, or as *expertly effective political actors*. We think of shady political operatives, career politicians who unscrupulously act to obtain power and influence, excellent behind-the-scene operators whose efforts are naturally described as *machinations* or *schemes*. These are people that you might want to have on your side, given the realities of politics, but they rarely exhibit anything morally attractive that we might describe as leadership or normative political expertise.

The key to finding a more compelling vision of political expertise is to set aside these "merely" expertly effective political actors and expert political analysts, and to focus more narrowly on those who excel at helping to achieve the *legitimizing* purposes of political institutions through their skillful judgment and action. To focus in this way requires a view about what those legitimizing purposes are, and a full defense in that regard would take us too far afield. Rather than going that route, I will use a simple model of a set of political institutions, roles, and accompanying legitimizing purposes for the sake of example, although I hope they correspond to plausible judgments about what actually might be legitimizing purposes of existing political institutions and roles within those institutions. The hope is to show how judgments about normative political expertise and expert political actors are connected to specific institutional and role contexts and to specific views about the legitimizing purposes of those political institutions and roles. This will provide the template for what I think is the correct way of thinking about political expertise in a normatively attractive light.

III. A Contextually Specific Story of Normative Political Expertise and Expert Political Actors

Above, I have suggested that to say anything about normative political expertise or expert political action, we must first fix various parameters:

- (1) the potentially legitimating purpose(s) of political institutions in a particular social context;
- (2) the institutions that are available to be used to achieve these purposes in this context; and
- (3) the role that an individual occupies in this institutional context.

Only after these three parameters are fixed can we identify what is required of an agent to be successful in acting to achieve the legitimating purpose, given the agent's role within the broader institutional context. In other words, only after fixing these parameters can we say what will likely be required for either normative political expertise or expert political action.

In this section, I will present one way of filling in (1)-(3) to provide a bit more flesh on the bones of the view of political expertise I am defending.

A. The Context: Modern Electoral Representative Constitutional Democracy

To fix the relevant social context, let us consider a sociopolitical context something like the contemporary United States: a large, relatively wealthy, racially and ethnically diverse, ideologically fragmented political community. Like the contemporary United States, this is a political community

with significant problems: racial injustice; significant socioeconomic inequality and poverty; high crime and incarceration rates relative to similarly wealthy countries; significant numbers of people who lack adequate health care; unequal access to quality public education; powerful multinational corporations that resist environmental and safety regulation and taxation; and others.

Let us imagine, then, that the potentially legitimating purposes of political and legal institutions in this context include the following:

Preventing Domination and Harm: checking the most powerful and well-resourced members of society so that they do not have dominion over the less powerful, undercut their autonomy, harm them, violate their rights, and so on

Minority Rights and Justice: protecting the rights of those whose interests or identities make them relatively vulnerable minorities within the broader political community, including redressing historical injustice perpetrated along racial lines

Working Together Under Conditions of Disagreement and Distrust: helping individuals and communities work together to solve various coordination and collective action problems, even when there is disagreement about what ought to be done and some distrust of those on the other side

Information Management and Use: harnessing expertise to make epistemically responsible policy and to respond productively to information asymmetries with respect to consumer products, health, safety, scientific and medical expertise, and so on

Respecting and Promoting Equality: promoting conditions of social equality and equality of opportunity, stemming from considerations of respect for the moral equality of all

Respecting and Promoting Autonomy: promoting conditions of individual and group autonomy, so that people can form their own personal conceptions of the good and valuable and make and enact life plans that align with those conceptions

Promoting Welfare: providing for the worst off and make sure that all morally significant creatures have what they need to survive and flourish

Assume that these are the central legitimating purposes of political and legal institutions in this context, so that if the extant institutions work to achieve these purposes, then they are legitimate—morally justified in acting, even though they act backed by coercive force. (Let us leave aside the complicated issues of how each of these different purposes is to be prioritized, how they interact with each other, what constraints there might be in how they can be pursued, and so on.)

Let us stipulate, too, that the political system is basically like that of the federal government of the United States: a bicameral elected legislature, elected executive, unelected constitutional court with strong powers of judicial review, extensive system of federal courts, large administrative state overseen by both the legislative and executive branches, and widespread (even if imperfect) rights of citizens to vote and participate in electoral politics.

Within these institutions, there are all kinds of different political and legal roles that a person can occupy: representative, president, secretary of state, supreme court justice, judge, prosecutor, EPA staff bureaucrat, voter, and more. For each role, we can ask what would be required for a person to have normative political expertise or to be an expert political actor.

The answer to these questions will be different for different roles. One significant difference is that some of these roles contribute to the achievement of the legitimating purposes, to the extent that they do, through tightly constrained behavior on the part of those who occupy those roles—behavior that often is not explicitly aimed at achieving *any* of the legitimating purposes directly. So, acting expertly in these roles might be a matter of acting only on a narrow set of reasons. For this reason, let us call these political roles *narrow political roles*. Consider, for example, the role of federal prosecutor or OSHA claim administrator. Individuals occupying those roles do have significant choices to make, and the best individuals in those roles will have expert knowledge of the relevant laws, rules, and a broader sense of the overall purpose of the institutions of which they are a part. But they will mostly not have a lot of discretion, and when we think of potential political experts we are unlikely to think of people in these roles.

Contrast these narrow political roles with what we might call *expansive political roles*. These are roles such that those occupying them have extensive discretion regarding what they will do, and a correspondingly complicated normative world to consider when trying to decide what they ought to do— what reasons ought to be considered, how those reasons ought to be weighed and assessed, and so on. Those individuals occupying these roles might well directly consider how their actions will or will not advance the legitimating purposes of the broader political and legal institutions of which they are a part. The specifics may still differ, depending on the details of the role, but all of these roles are ones for which we can fruitfully consider what might be required for normative political expertise or expert political action. Some central examples of these roles: elected legislative representative, supreme court justice, president, and democratic voter.

B. Political Expertise and Elected Political Representatives

Let us focus on the role of elected political representative. This is perhaps the quintessential expansive political role, and it is plausible that elected political representatives should be thinking about how to act to achieve the legitimating purposes of the political system directly. They are charged with crafting legislation and policy to help address these problems and achieve these purposes. Accordingly, as I've argued elsewhere, elected "representatives face multiple competing norms regarding how they ought to behave: norms of fidelity (doing as they said they would), norms of deference (doing as their constituents would presently prefer), norms of guardianship (doing as would be best for their constituents), and moral norms of a more general sort,"⁴ including moral norms regarding what would be best for the whole political community, what justice requires by way of helping the world's worst off, the future inhabitants of the political community, and future generations, and so on. And, in addition to all the different individuals whose interests might be relevant, there are different normative dimensions to those interests that might be relevant: equality, welfare, autonomy, and justice, for example. They must work to represent the majority as well as minority interests, to think of the present but also the future, to think of the people they represent but also the world, and, in every extant example of elected representatives, to do so in a generalist way—trying to discern what the right thing to do is regarding topics as diverse as agricultural production, education, healthcare, national defense, trade, transportation, and water regulation.

Given this normative complexity, it is no surprise that political expertise has often been equated with *moral* expertise. This is evident in the tradition discussing political expertise going back to Plato. As is well known, in the *Republic*, Plato defends the idea that those with political power should be a certain very particularly educated elite, rather than those who have prevailed in democratic elections. Their claim to rule depends, in large part, on their knowledge of the good and

⁴ Guerrero, A. (2010) "The Paradox of Voting and the Ethics of Political Representation," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 38, p. 281.

their virtuous moral character.⁵ The Platonic tradition stemming from the *Republic* provides a useful way of understanding one view of what would make even an elected political representative an expert political actor. Here's Melissa Lane, discussing the view of political expertise set out in the *Republic*:

“By making the claim of the philosophers to rule depend on their knowledge of the good and of the other Platonic Forms (in conjunction with their moral character and tested practical experience), the dialogue vindicates the Socratic and Platonic thought that ruling well—what we might call “rule” proper – requires a rare form of expertise rather than lay judgment, rhetorical advice, or common knowledge. In the *Republic*, the knowledge required for rule is not specialized, but comprehensive: the knowledge of the good and the Forms is somehow to translate into an ability to make laws as well as the everyday decisions of rule...”⁶

Given the nature of expansive political roles, it is no surprise that an account of expert political action in those roles will require something other than highly specialized knowledge. Moral knowledge or moral expertise is an attractive option. But it cannot be the full story. There are at least two problems with the simple equation between political expert and moral expert.

The first is that, given modern policy complexity, it is implausible that moral expertise is *sufficient* for political expertise. Even Plato stressed that practical experience and broad education would also be important. But there is a larger worry that the sheer evidential complexity of making laws and policies that will help to advance the legitimating purposes of political institutions will make *epistemic* qualities essential for an elected representative to be either a normative political expert or an expert political actor.

Which qualities? Well, consider the significant epistemic burden elected representatives face in order to have a correct or even plausible view about what ought to be done. It is not realistic to expect any one person to be (a) an expert political analyst (an expert about what there is to be known about political science, the subtle workings of political institutions, political psychology, political history); (b) an expert on all of the domains relevant to modern policymaking (broad academic-level domains such as economics, sociology, and history, as well as other relevant domains such as healthcare economics, insurance, financial instruments, environmental science, agricultural science, trade regulation, constitutional law, etc.); (c) an expert on all of the substantial policy proposals, (d) an expert on constituent beliefs and preferences regarding all of these, (e) an expert on the likely effects of these proposals if they were to be implemented... and then, even having a mastery of the entire “descriptive” side of the equation, to also be a moral expert regarding the normative import of these descriptive facts.

Rather than being an expert on all these topics, spanning all these domains, it is more plausible that electoral representative expertise will involve representatives exhibiting certain epistemic virtues or engaging in certain epistemic practices, in addition to whatever else we might want in terms of moral expertise. In particular, for electoral representatives to know what ought to be done or to do what ought to be done, they will also need to excel at exhibiting appropriate epistemic humility and an awareness of where one's knowledge runs thin, appropriate deference to legitimate experts, broad interest and minimal competence in a wide range of topics, the ability to

⁵ As one of the leading experts on the topic puts it, “In the *Republic*, the philosophers are to rule not in virtue of any peculiarly political knowledge they possess, but rather in virtue of their synoptic and pervasive understanding of the Good.” Lane, M.S. (1998) *Method and politics in Plato's 'Statesman'*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, p. 3.

⁶ Lane, M.S. (2017) “Ancient Political Philosophy,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, E. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/ancient-political/>>.

gather information about constituent beliefs and preferences (where this may require empathy, engagement, and abilities beyond mere polling in cases in which constituents might not have formed beliefs and preferences), the ability to identify trustworthy assistants and delegate epistemic tasks to those individuals, the ability to discern the reliability of diverse sources of information, and so on. Call these the *epistemic virtues of expert political representatives*.

On this view, significant impediments to being an expert political actor or a normative political expert as an elected representative would be arrogance, overconfidence, an unwillingness to rely on others, a propensity to surround oneself with like-minded “yes people” who say what the representative wants to hear, an ideological approach to filtering experts and evidence based on non-epistemic considerations and consonance with the representative’s prior views, a dogmatic reluctance to revise one’s prior views, a dislike and corresponding distrust of those different from oneself, and so on. These are epistemic failings and limitations, and they would undercut the claim of someone who was otherwise a moral expert to be a political expert.

It is true, of course, that any well-designed institutional setting for elected representatives will provide those representatives with staff and opportunities for research, investigation, discussion, deliberation, constituent consultation, and so on. The suggestion here is that these will only result in potentially expert political action or normative political expertise if representatives in these settings possess the aforementioned epistemic virtues. Moral virtue alone will be insufficient—at least if it is construed, as is typical, to be compatible with the absence of these epistemic virtues.

This suggestion regarding the distinctive political importance of a subtle, open, curious, and flexible epistemic approach receives some support in recent empirical work concerning the reliability of expert judgment. Philip Tetlock, in his influential book on the topic, states his conclusion regarding the evidence of reliability and expertise:

If we want realistic odds on what will happen next, coupled to a willingness to admit mistakes, we are better off turning to experts who embody the intellectual traits of Isaiah Berlin’s prototypical fox—those who “know many little things,” draw from an eclectic array of traditions, and accept ambiguity and contradiction as inevitable features of life—than we are turning to Berlin’s hedgehogs—those who “know one big thing,” toil devotedly within one tradition, and reach for formulaic solutions to ill-defined problems.⁷

Although his focus is on what makes for reliable expert judgment, not political expertise, this provides some reason to think that the epistemic component of being a political expert will also be better served by openminded foxes rather than single-minded ideological hedgehogs.

A second reason to think that moral expertise alone may be insufficient for political expertise is that elected political representatives usually act against background conditions of deep disagreement about morality. It is implausible that what makes for an expert political representative is just being better than most at knowing the truth about morality. A significant part of being an expert political representative is knowing how one ought to proceed given deep and substantive disagreement about morality. On at least some occasions, that might mean doing what one knows is not the morally best thing. On other occasions, it might mean using one’s judgment to effectively override a significant proportion of the political community. If we have an expansive conception of moral expertise such that it includes knowledge of when one ought to defer, compromise, or override in the face of moral disagreement, then this would perhaps not be a

⁷ Tetlock, P. (2017) *Expert Political Judgment*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 2.

concern. But on a narrower conception of moral expertise, these important aspects would be left out.⁸

Normative political expertise and expert political action retain a thoroughly *political* element—where the political is tightly connected to conditions of extended and expected disagreement about what ought to be done. Sometimes the path to the morally best possible outcome is complicated and treacherous. Sometimes the shortest route to the good outcome is unlikely to achieve that outcome in a stable and lasting way. Sometimes it is difficult or impossible to know which paths forward are feasible. In some cases, having a sophisticated grasp of the moral considerations might be enough to discern what one ought to do. But in other cases, all manner of non-moral, empirical considerations will be relevant—how extensive is the disagreement, what are its sources, which means are actually available, what is currently feasible, what will happen if X or Y is put in place, and so on. If this is correct, then political expertise will require more than just moral expertise, even expertise regarding knowledge of conditional claims such as “if X is the case empirically, then we morally ought to do A.” It will also involve being expert at knowing or investigating when these various empirical antecedents hold—no easy task in the case of complex political circumstances—as suggested in the previous discussion of the epistemic virtue required for political expertise. And it will involve difficult decisions regarding compromise, conflict resolution, mediation, and the need to override dissenting opinion. Call this the skill of expert *disagreement navigation*.⁹

The above considerations suggest that moral expertise is not *sufficient* for elected representatives to be normative political experts or expert political actors—but is moral expertise *necessary*? If we are skeptical about the possibility of moral experts, this might generate another reason for skepticism about political expertise. An initial question is what is meant by *moral expertise*. A full discussion would take us too far afield, but it is worth drawing a distinction between at least two senses of moral expert: the expert moral analyst (an expert in the *knowledge*

⁸ One would expect that even those who reject public reason political liberalism as the correct framework for political philosophy would acknowledge that in at least some cases of actual moral disagreement, political leaders might be *morally* required to pursue compromise or other non-morally optimal options. For a prominent critic of public reason views, see Enoch, D. (2015) “Against Public Reason,” *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy*, Vol 1 (David Sobel, Peter Vallentyne, Steven Wall, eds.). That compromise in the face of disagreement is sometimes required in this way is itself a substantive commitment of political morality.

⁹ This second limitation of the simple equation between political and moral expertise—the need for a certain kind of refined political sensitivity and navigation in the face of disagreement—suggests that while Plato of the *Republic* might be in trouble, Plato of the *Statesman* might be on the right track for providing an attractive conception of what is required for being an expert political representative. The *Statesman* offers a conception of political expertise on which the political expert has “the unique role of commanding when each expert should perform his [sic] work and so coordinating the work of different experts” resulting in a view on which “[p]olitical expertise is neither meta-knowledge nor another species of knowledge, but rather knowledge of the relation between other forms of knowledge and the temporal demands of the moment of action, or the *kairos*.” Lane (1998), pp. 3-4. A second dimension of political expertise is explicitly concerned with responding to the *political* situation: “The political expert is also to carry out the task of weaving together two conflicting factions in the city. Each of these factions is conceived as characteristically disposed to err on one side or the other of the mean, in making evaluative judgments.” *Id.*, p. 10. As Lane summarizes the view: “The statesman is wholly defined by the possession of that knowledge of when it is best to exercise the other arts and its exercise in binding the different groups of citizens together, a knowledge which depends on a broader philosophical grasp but which is peculiarly political.” Lane (2017).

that sense) and the expert moral actor (an expert in the *knowledge how* sense, who is particularly skillful as a moral actor).

The former sense of expert will be familiar from our earlier discussions. On this view, a moral expert is just an expert analyst with respect to morality (using the terminology from the beginning of the paper), meaning that the person possesses a high absolute and population relative level of propositional knowledge regarding morality, are able to identify relevant considerations, and develop methods to help answer and understand future moral questions.

The other sense of moral expert—the sense that focuses on being an expert moral actor—connects moral knowledge with acting and living well. This is a familiar idea from the Ancient Greek philosophical tradition. As Julia Annas describes the view: “[m]oral knowledge is knowledge which is, among other things, about how to act; it is also knowledge that is put into practice...” and “[w]hen moral knowledge is thought of as a skill... its object is global—namely, your life as a whole.”¹⁰ Moral expertise in this sense is constituted by acting and living particularly well.

For an elected representative to be a normative political expert or an expert political actor, must that representative be an expert moral analyst or be living particularly well in moral terms? Are either of these a requirement of being an expert political representative? Recall that success in acting in this institutional context is defined as success in helping to bring about the legitimating purposes of the extant legal and political institutions. We can ask: does doing this require moral expertise in either of these senses?

It doesn't seem to require that one be living *unusually* well—in a way that is better than most people. It is plausible that to be an effective elected representative one must not engage in certain kinds of morally bad behavior, since some such behavior will undermine one's credibility and real or perceived legitimacy as a representative. And one is perhaps more likely to be an expert political actor as an elected representative if one is living in a way that reinforces those ideals that are necessary to achieve the legitimating aims of political institutions: preventing harm, supporting social equality, protecting minority rights and interests, fostering peaceful and productive interactions, creating stable communities of trust and cooperation even in the face of disagreement, promoting individual autonomy and welfare, and so on. Just as there are ways in which institutions can help accomplish these aims, so, too, there are ways in which we as individuals can contribute to them. Harmony between one's personal actions and one's efforts qua political representative is likely to be helpful in achieving these institutional efforts. This is one place where ideas of personal *leadership* might be usefully invoked. But must one also be an excellent friend, a loyal sibling and child, a person who enjoys the higher pleasures rather than zoning out in one's free time playing video games or watching silly movies? These seem to be of only peripheral relevance to being an expert political actor, since they do not very closely connect to these core purposes of political institutions. Call those moral virtues related to the broader legitimating purposes of political institutions the virtues related to *ethical leadership*.

Does one have to be an expert moral analyst in order to be a normative political expert or an expert political actor? It does seem that ability in this regard will be significant, precisely because of the difficulty involved in acting to achieve the legitimating aims of political institutions. There is, as noted earlier, significant non-moral complexity and expertise that is relevant to making good political decisions. But even when much of the empirical evidence is in, hard questions remain. Thinking how all the relevant moral considerations interact is a difficult and serious project. This doesn't mean that a person needs to be a moral philosopher—a trained expert moral analyst in that sense. Rather, it means that to be a normative political expert or an expert political actor, one must be attuned to a wide range of moral considerations, to be—as with other, non-moral domains—epistemically open and alive to inquiry, and to be willing to think seriously about

¹⁰ Annas, J. (2001) “Moral Knowledge as Practical Knowledge,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 18(2), pp. 244, 253.

the real moral complexity that exists when considering the many distinct legitimating purposes of political institutions in the modern political context. One must possess a high degree of moral sensitivity in order to act well consistently given this complexity, which suggests that one will need to be at least relatively expert as a moral analyst more generally.

IV. Conclusion

To sum up: to be a normative political expert and an expert political actor as an elected political representative—given the expansive nature of that role and the moral complexity of the legitimating purposes of modern political institutions—one will need to (a) exhibit a wide range of epistemic virtues concerning openminded, thoughtful inquiry and practices of appropriate epistemic deference and trust; (b) excel at the skills required for disagreement navigation and conflict resolution; (c) act in ways that exhibit the moral virtues of ethical leadership in terms of how one engages with others; and (d) be relatively expert as a moral analyst, sensitive to a wide range of moral considerations, and relatively good at thinking through complex moral issues. The suggestion is that the better one is at (a)-(d), the better one will be at acting so as to achieve the legitimating purposes of the political institutions described in the beginning of this section.

Crucially, this is *not* a general account of what is required for political expertise; it is not even a general account of what is required to be an expert political representative, as there might be other institutional settings in which some or all of (a)-(d) are not relevant, or for which other components would be. The account is supposed to highlight the embedded and contextual nature of political expertise, focusing only on what would be required of certain individuals in certain roles in certain institutional contexts in order for them to act so as to help achieve the legitimating purposes of those institutions.

Due to the functionalist, contextualist nature of the account, it is also a view about political expertise that is fundamentally 'hostage' to empirical considerations. The account I have sketched is something of a prediction or guess at what will be required for elected political representatives to act expertly in the kinds of sociopolitical contexts described at the beginning of the section, where that just means: to act so as to collectively bring about the legitimating purposes of the institutions of which they are a part. It is possible that the features (a)-(d) that I have put forward are not actually necessary or sufficient to do this. It is also possible that whether they are or not may depend on, for example, what the other political representatives are like, whether they also possess those qualities, and so forth. Ideally, these suggestions would come to be tested through modeling or empirical study—although there are hard questions about how to operationalize these features, how to measure success, and much else. The philosopher's role here is to propose a theory, but that shouldn't be the end of the project. This normative functionalist, contextualist view of political expertise sets out a template for offering accounts of what makes for political expertise in other contexts and for other political roles, but it doesn't answer those questions directly, suggesting a place for future research and argument.

It also helps us see the way in which our extant political institutions implicitly or explicitly require people with certain skills in order for those institutions to achieve their legitimating purposes. This, in turn, might lead us to be skeptical either that there are any such people (perhaps the expertise demanded isn't possessed by anyone), or that the mechanisms in place for putting people into roles within the institutions are not doing a good job of putting people with those skills in the appropriate roles. We might ask, for example, whether elections as structured in the United States actually do a good job selecting people who possess the skills required to be expert political actors in those roles—the previously discussed epistemic virtues, skill in navigating disagreement, virtues of ethical leaders, and moral sensitivity and sophisticated moral sensibility. If they do not, then we have a problem on our hands, and it might suggest either institutional reform or reform in what we are asking of people in the various roles.

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