

# Political Disagreement and Epistemic Value

In this paper I want to examine a particular feature of political disagreement that sits uncomfortably with common accounts in the epistemology of disagreement: that political disagreement can itself have political significance and that this significance can be epistemically relevant. I will argue that this should lead us to consider a pluralist view about epistemic value. On this view, the epistemic norms that govern how we should respond to political disagreement are not solely based on the aim of acquiring a true belief. In particular, I claim that moral or political considerations can figure in such other values.

My argument is motivated by cases of political disagreement that standard accounts in the epistemology of disagreement have a hard time accommodating: one example is a case of an allegation of sexual harassment where the two sides disagree on how to interpret what happened between them. Another scenario is that of a trans woman debating someone who denies that transwomen “are really women” without at all considering that her interlocutor might be right.

Most popular accounts of disagreement focus on each side’s competence regarding the issue or on other symmetry breakers like who is actually justified in their initial belief. But they cannot fully make sense of the above cases, because they overlook their political dimension. In the first case, slogans like “believe women” or “believe survivors” show that many people think one should prioritise the view of the alleged victim, while the woman in the second scenario seems entirely justified in steadfastly insisting on her position. In neither of the cases this is (only) due to the agents’ differing competences or their initial degree of justification. Instead, political considerations seem to be at play.

If we want to take the political nature of these cases seriously we should look for an answer at the level of epistemic value. Cases like the above themselves have political significance, determined by the social location of the interlocutors, its context or the topic discussed. In such cases the truth of the controversial claim might not be the only epistemic value underlying the relevant norm.

I spell out this idea by suggesting that political inquiry also serves a political purpose of realising political goals or contributing to making societies more just. The political significance of a disagreement is epistemically relevant when it concerns this function of political disagreement. For example, part of the political significance of allegations of harassment lies exactly in the way that the voices of women and victims are and have historically been systematically discounted (at least in particular contexts). There can be a tension between the aim of forming a true belief and an aim of not sacrificing an important political goal relevant to this very issue in the process. These two aims should be balanced against each other, this way the rational response to political disagreement can be determined in part by political or moral considerations.