"Political Studies, Political Knowledge, and Epistemic Responsibility"

APSA Presidential Address
Professor Emeritus Jim Jose
28 September 2022
Australian National University
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The opportunity to reflect on the state of our discipline is a privilege afforded the outgoing President, who for forty-five minutes or so gets to air their views on whatever subject takes their fancy. Provided that they link up, no matter how tangentially, with some reflections on the state of discipline, or at least some aspect of it, they have a more or less free rein. Working within the broad discipline of political studies, we occupy a privileged position as producers of political knowledge. This I contend confers on us a particular responsibility, epistemic responsibility. I will return to this idea of epistemic responsibility in due course. I should also point out that the title page for this address is not an incidental aspect. It serves as something of a meta-statement, a possible critique or dissenting comment on the position that I am about to mark out. If time permits, I will offer a brief explanation of why this image can be read as a critical perspective on what I am about to say.

The theme for the 2022 conference is "Re-imagining an Uncertain Political Future". Central to such re-imagining is the idea that things can be other than they are, that the future can be different and better. Of course, re-imagining a future different from the present takes us into the realm of utopian thinking. Yet as Helen Sullivan (2021, 5) put it in her Presidential address last year, "commit[ting] ourselves to utopian thinking", of "investing in imagination", is at least one strategy political studies can pursue to save the world. Granted, and as Helen also alluded to, for many students of politics, utopian thinking is a much discredited way of thinking given that the events of the past 150 years have (allegedly) demonstrated the folly of attempts to implement a re-imagined future. And as Ursula Le Guin long ago pointed out, far too much utopian thinking has simply been a great "big yang motorcycle trip", over-determined by Euclidean, European and masculinist biases. As she pointed out, if we are to overcome the injustices of the present, of "eluding its self-destruction", then imagining a better future must involve "a reversal" of this approach to utopian thinking (Le Guin 1982, 90).

Yet just what might this reversal entail? How might we begin to think about it, let alone implement it? If such a reversal is to be effective it is likely to involve a substantially revalued epistemological basis for thinking about and

doing political studies, perhaps something along the lines of "unlearning the political" as I have argued elsewhere (Jose 2017). But even if the idea of "unlearning the political" turns out not to be a satisfactory answer, the question of how political studies might contribute to this reversal remains to be answered. I am not sure that I can answer that question in any definitive sense, but perhaps by reflecting on our discipline through the lens of epistemic responsibility we can move a step closer to an answer.

The rationale for finding an answer is not just a matter of abstract political theorising about political studies. Our current political and historical context, indeed the trajectory of Australian politics over most of the past fifty years, underscores a need to rethink our politics, our political institutions, and political practices. Two inter-related aspects of this trajectory has given me some cause for concern. The first is the emergence of an "anything goes" approach to getting elected and staying elected, and the second concerns what contemporary scholars are calling the era of "post-truth politics" (e.g. Arias-Maldonado 2020; Block 2019; Hopkin and Rosamond 2018; Hyvönen 2018; Keane 2018; Peters, Rider, Hyvönen & Besley 2018; Suiter 2016).

For the last quarter of the twentieth century Australian politics could be understood to have been characterised by a "whatever it takes" approach (Jose 2005; Richardson 1994). However, as the twenty-first century unfolded, this has given way to what I would call "anything goes". That is, that now anything can be said or done to achieve a political objective, irrespective of context, evidence or logic, and without fear of any serious consequences. In some respects this is simply the logical result of giving free rein to a "whatever it takes" strategy— eventually the framework of norms and conventions loses its ability to guide behaviour as one by one, bit by bit, individual norms and conventions are ignored or over-ridden. This is not just a matter of a greater propensity for politicians (and their minions and backers) to lie and deceive to achieve their objectives, or to backstab their political foes, and so on. "Anything goes" encompasses more than these things, and is more damaging; it is the animus of a potentially new normal. In the era of "post-truth politics" we may well have arrived at our heart of darkness.

Ostensibly, the idea of "post-truth politics" aims to capture the core characteristic of an era in which lying, spin, bullshit, careless speech and deception are normalised to the point where they are all but indistinguishable, and where stupidity and ignorance are valorised as admirable political qualities. Of course lauding ignorance or revelling in not-knowing is nothing new, just think of the "know-nothings" in the USA in the mid-19th century (Boissoneault 2017). What appears to be new is how valorising ignorance dovetails with an "anything goes" approach and seemingly legitimises it. One visible characteristic of "post-truth politics" is a "loosening of the relationship between political rhetoric and 'truth'", of the relationship between "political utterances" and "verifiable facts" (Hopkin and Rosamond 2018, 642). And it is not just the

actuality of this loosening, it is also the lack of concern and sense of pride that accompanies this loosening. It is a lack born of arrogance and disdain.

In her essay "Truth and Politics", Hannah Arendt (1980) distinguished between what she understood to be "factual truths" and "rational truths". Arendt was concerned about the relationship between truth and politics and her purpose in making this distinction was to mark out the type of "truths" that she saw as proper to the domain of politics. She bracketed off what she termed "rational truths" and distinguished them from "factual truths" on the basis that rational truths pertained to those truths that are tautologically true, true by definition, like "A triangle is a three-sided figure", "$2 + 2 = 4$", and so on.

Arendt's "factual truths" are the "verifiable facts" as understood in the perspectives of Hopkin and Rosamond (2018) and others. As Arendt (1980, 242) argued (and *contra* to Sari 2018, 153), "factual truths", our "verifiable facts", are always a matter of contingency. They become true by virtue of the outcome of replicable demonstration, or alignment with agreed upon evidence, or simply conforming with norms of logic and argument. This provides the basis for political actors, commentators of varying descriptions, and ordinary citizens to identify and settle on the relevant particular facts that would inform discrete political positions and serve as the basis for specific decisions and policies—which for Arendt, is the core of politics, in her words, "the very texture of the political realm" (Arendt 1980, 231). But verifiable facts remain contingent because even where evidence, experiment and argument uphold particular understandings or interpretations of facts, it is always open for newly found evidence or more finely calibrated experiments or more sophisticated arguments to lead to different, even contrary, understandings or facts. This is the nature of all knowledge, including political knowledge.

For us, political knowledge covers a very broad remit. As Helen Sullivan summarised it in her Presidential Address last year:

> We study the constitution and exercise of power within and between countries, interests, groups, and individuals. We explore the role of political ideas, ideologies, institutions, policies, processes, and behaviour. We understand how people are influenced and how political messages are communicated effectively. We are methodologically diverse, and epistemically promiscuous in that we have connections with multiple other disciplines (Sullivan 2021, npn).

Our research or inquiries try "to find the correct answer to a particular question or the correct solution to a particular intellectual problem[,] … of getting at the truth about whatever matter we are concerned with at the time" (Alston 2005, 30). Collectively, through these studies and more, we create, reproduce, transmit and interpret whatever might be taken to be the verifiable facts at the time. Their true-ness is not given by the factual truths in and of themselves (i.e. the facts do not speak for themselves). Their true-ness emerges from dialogue

and debate and a tenuous, provisional, consensus established through "human communicative action" (Ördén 2022, 385). Their true-ness is the product of our intellectual labours, though as we are only too aware, we labour in circumstances only partly chosen by us.

I recognise we are not the only ones who might produce political knowledge. Indeed anyone with the means to write and disseminate an opinion about politics (e.g. journalists, politicians, bloggers etc) might claim to produce political knowledge. At the risk of over-stating our own importance, what distinguishes our work from that of others working outside of the disciplinary framework of political studies is that our work professes to rest on "research based findings not partisan and personal opinions", as Linda Botterill noted in her Presidential Address in 2015 (Botterill 2015, 9). Indeed, Linda put the point a little more firmly when she went on to note, drawing on Gerry Stoker's (2013) characterisation of political studies work, that our research findings are based on "rigorous, replicable and transparent research" (Botterill 2015, 10). We produce political knowledge not bald-faced opinion, or asserted belief, or even wishful thinking—though it is not without some irony that we need to acknowledge that we too produce "alternative facts", though perhaps not quite in the sense that KellyAnne Conway of the "Trump-it" brigade had in mind (Blake 2017).

What we produce also serves in large measure to create and constitute our discipline (c.f. Messer-Davidow, Shumway and Sylvan 1995; Lowi 1992), and by extension contributes to our sense of professional identity. In many respects it is a mutually reinforcing process. Within that disciplinary space co-exist various and diverse methodological approaches to shape our enquiries, numerous measures of excellence to judge the worth of our efforts, and criteria of demarcation and validation to police our activities and to sanction and reward our efforts. Much of this activity takes place within institutional locations that enable our disciplinary practices to be recognised and validated, while simultaneously diluting and eroding them.

These institutions purport to recognise our disciplinary norms and practices but at the same time they reshape or force-fit our norms and practices into everchanging vision statements and research strategies driven by institutional needs and government directed priorities (c.f. Guthrie and Lucas 2022). Think of the various government policies shaping grant seeking practices for universities and researchers alike; or the quest for Athena Swan medals of approval to brand the gender affirming and gender aware credentials of the institution's STEMM efforts (c.f. the unintended gender irony of the name, Athena Swan). Whether we like it or not we come to be "held in place" by these "[institutional] structures and disciplinary practices," as Jenny Lewis noted in her 2017 Presidential Address (Lewis 2017, 3). And just as importantly, what is held in place, our physical being and our identities, is continuously under challenge, and slowly but surely changed into something other than we intend.

Despite these pitfalls, these institutional locations bestow upon us considerable epistemic authority. But with this epistemic authority comes a concomitant measure of epistemic responsibility. It is not easy to define 'epistemic responsibility' succinctly, as many of the scholars writing about epistemic responsibility do so in a vague way, definitionally speaking. The common thread seems to be grounded in the virtue accorded to the knower. Thus Lorraine Code, a feminist philosopher who singlehandedly shifted epistemic responsibility from the margins of philosophical analysis into the mainstream, argued that "epistemic responsibility is a central virtue from which other virtues radiate" and which assists us towards the getting of wisdom (Code 2020, 8). It can be understood as a duty to be intellectually virtuous, or as being responsible for what one believes, or as being responsible for "what one is justified in accepting or knowing in a blameworthy and/or praiseworthy sense" (Corlett 2008, 182).

For me there is something a little unsatisfactory here, in that this threefold understanding of epistemic responsibility risks lapsing into what I would term 'epistemic individualism'. That is to say that the epistemological focus valorises the perspective of the isolated, self-contained individual whose "key epistemic attributes […] are argued to be 'universal'" (Alcoff and Potter 1993, 4) and who offers the "view from nowhere" (Code 1993, 20) whereby the knower is able to "claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation" (Haraway 1988: 581). The focus is on the sense of responsibility on the part of the knower for the content of what they claim to know, content that is understood independently of its context of production and the knower's subjectivity and social position. Yet as Donna Haraway has so persuasively argued, we are knowers who are always somewhere, our knowledge is always situated (Haraway 1988); our views are enabled or constrained by that somewhere as the case may be (Medina 2013, 252). Epistemic responsibility cannot be understood as a transcendentally isolated process.

We need to recognise that none of us produces anything in splendid isolation. The research process itself often involves collaborative work or depends on the subsidiary input of others. Even those who produce sole-authored works do not publish on their own. Their work is reviewed by the editors or editorial collective of journals and publishing houses, and then by at least two, and oftentimes more, reviewers whose input and approval is necessary before that sole authored piece appears in print. Put another way, the final published entity through which our political knowledge becomes a public artefact is the result of many hands. Insofar as the political knowledge that we produce is informed by its location within a community of scholars and its deployment within and across the multiple discourses within those communities, so too is epistemic responsibility. By its deployment and action epistemic responsibility also feeds into the dynamics that shape the nature of

those communities. Hence 'epistemic responsibility' needs to be conceptualised from a collective perspective.

So by 'epistemic responsibility' I mean a specific kind of responsibility, conceptualised from a collective perspective, that marks out the responsibility to pursue an epistemic good in the sense of ascertaining the "truth" of whatever matter is at hand. But as I suggested earlier, such truth, the verifiable facts as it were, is contingent, and is a product as much of its time and place as of its producer. Perhaps, the phrase used by Code fits better here, namely that epistemic responsibility is about knowing well (Code 2020, 2), to gain or produce knowledge with an eye to the "moral import of cognitive activity" (Code 2020, 73). In knowing well we are aiming not just for knowledge but also for some sort of wisdom about whatever it is that is under investigation. That is to say, we are trying to make sense of some political phenomena, we are trying to explain something that is not yet understood, we are trying to solve a problem or to push the boundaries of our theories, and so on, but in such a way as to be better informed in ourselves as well as for those who make use of what we produce.

Knowing well about political knowledge is also about dispelling ignorance, especially ignorance of things political. Ignorance appears in many guises and there are numerous ways of classifying them as various scholars have shown (see e.g., Proctor and Schiebinger 2008; Proctor 2008; Sullivan & Tuana 2007; Bishop and Phillips 2006; Tuana & Sullivan 2006; Sedgwick 1994; Frye 1983). For the most part these are all variations on filling a gap or overcoming a lack in our knowledge of a given matter. There is also a more malignant form of ignorance that is much harder to negate with appeals to the facts or other forms of demonstrable evidence. This is the phenomenon of non-knowing.

Non-knowing is an idea developed by Charles Mills to describe a specific kind of ignorance, "white ignorance", one that is central to the dynamics of contemporary racism (Mills 2008, 233; 1997). While Mills was concerned with unpacking the politics of whiteness through which he argued racism is nurtured, his conceptualisation of ignorance can be applied to other contexts of non-knowing. In Mills' view, non-knowing is made possible through particular cognitive phenomena such as "misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception" that in turn, argues Mills, rest on a "certain schedule of structured … opacities" (Mills 1997, 19). It is an outcome of an active process that makes it impossible, in the normal course of events, to recognise that anything is being excluded. It is not so much that what should be known is rendered invisible, though it might be that as well, but that it is rendered inaccessible. What dwells in the realm of the non-known is not part of the realm of cognition through which something can be recognised, let alone accepted as being known.

We can extend Mills' approach beyond racism to sexism, ableism, ageism, and classism since "[c]ognitive authority is usually associated with a cluster of markings" such as these (Alcoff and Potter 1993, 3), which are similarly shaped by the non-knowing form of ignorance. This is not accidental, nor is it a form of ignorance that is passively reproduced. In his study of the idea of epistemic resistance José Medina identified three types of behaviour of relevance here: arrogance (arising from a sense of entitlement or privilege); closed-mindedness (avoiding information that might unsettle the common sense of their particular environment), and laziness (a refusal, consciously or unconsciously, to change one's behaviours) (Medina 2013, 27-3). Singularly or in combination these three behaviours enable the cognitive phenomena of "misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception" (Mills 1997: 18) to flourish and naturalise non-knowing. In so doing non-knowing permeates and structures everyday common sense in such a way that human knowers become oblivious to it, in much the same way that fish are oblivious of the water in which they swim (Einstein 1950, 8).

Briefly, here are three examples of non-knowing ignorance – one historical and the others of much more recent vintage. First, concerns the Colonial Office thinking in the late eighteenth century that informed the decision to establish a penal colony on already occupied land (see e.g. Reynolds 2022). The fact of prior occupation was conveniently ignored and subsumed within the idea of *terra nullius* until that myth was overturned by the High Court of Australia in 1993. A second example is the response and comments of the former Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, concerning the alleged rape of a parliamentary staffer in 2019 in an office of one of his then Ministers. Not only did he reveal that he had to be coached by his wife about how to think about rape as an issue, he also remained steadfast that until February 2021 he had not been informed of an alleged rape in a Minister's office in a government of which he was the leader (see Tingle 2021). A third example is a speech by Justice Judith Kelly to the Northern Territory branch of the Australian Women Lawyers Association in which she asserted that Australia is not a racist country and that the terms like "institutional racism" or "systemic racism" should be "eschew[ed] … unless there is *at least some evidence* that the institution in question does actually have racist policies – ie systematically treats Aboriginal people less favourably on the basis of their race" (Kelly 2022. Emphasis in the original). All three examples exhibit varying degrees of arrogance, close-mindedness and laziness that form the "structured opacities" (Mills 1997, 19) characteristic of non-knowing ignorance.

It is tempting to treat non-knowing as something like "culturally induced moral ignorance", which purportedly renders people incapable of knowing anything other than what is permitted by the cultural values, practices, behaviours and beliefs within which they have been raised. The idea of "culturally induced moral ignorance" has given rise to considerable discussion,

much of it concerned with the basis for moral judgments and in particular the issue of telling right from wrong (see e.g. Arango and Lustig 2022; Code 2004; Ikuenobe 1998; Buchanan 1996; Moody-Adams 1994). If someone cannot have known otherwise then in what sense can they be deemed responsible for their views and actions, how can they be held culpable or accountable for them? These are important and difficult questions, particularly in our own historical context of coming to grips with the legacies of colonialism and the kinds of political knowledge we might produce, not to mention how those legacies and their impacts might shape that knowledge, directly or indirectly. The difference between non-knowing and not knowing forms of ignorance is that not-knowing is amenable (sooner or later) to evidence, counter-argument and persuasion, whereas non-knowing is not (Zerilli 2020).

Non-knowing forms a lens of knowing, not just as the means to constitute what is able to be known, but as an integral part of the cognitive process by and through which knowing occurs. Non-knowing makes it difficult for "both moral and epistemic considerations …[to]… unsettle" the common sense understandings that empower "ignorance to promote and sustain unjust social orders" (Code 2004, 293). But it does not render such considerations redundant, nor does it absolve us of those responsibilities. Despite the implied passivity in the notion of "culturally induced moral ignorance", it nevertheless requires active effort, both individually and collectively, as Medina (2013) and Mills (1997) have argued. Arrogance, closed-mindedness and laziness are active processes which feed and shape multiple forms of misunderstandings, misrepresentations, evasions, and self-deceptions and which singly and in combination serve to valorise ignorance. Being epistemically responsible requires paying attention to those temptations within our research (and teaching) activities that might encourage us to be arrogant about what we do, to be close-minded and lazy in how we go about producing and transmitting political knowledge.

To conclude, my central theme has been concerned with suggesting that it is important for us as producers of political knowledge to be epistemically responsible. Being epistemically responsible is not quite the same as attending to the ethics of how we undertake and report our research, though there is clearly some affinity between the two as the idea of 'knowing well' implies. Nor have I been concerned about researching in a socially responsible manner as per the arguments of the Community for Responsible Research in Business and Management (cRRBM 2020). It is possible to undertake research in an ethical manner that produces knowledge, political or otherwise, while still being epistemically irresponsible. For example, research defending tobacco use, or fossil fuel use, or supporting the denial of climate change research could be described as being conducted in an ethical manner while at the same time being epistemically irresponsible (for case studies see Proctor and Schiebinger 2008). Such studies are not produced to get at the truth of the matter, to know well in

Code's sense, but rather they aim to produce their own "verifiable facts" to support whatever might be their overall political objectives.

Nor am I pointing to yet another variation on speaking truth to power. Producing political knowledge that aims to get to the truth of the matter may well end up speaking truth to power. That is probably a good thing, though it is also fraught. There are many ways in which those with power can frustrate or silence views that seek to establish the verifiable facts through being epistemically responsible, (i.e. knowing well). I am not wishing to discount those difficulties. Ubiquitous codes of conduct and weasel-word notions like "bringing the institution into disrepute" or "tarnishing the brand of the institution" are well known means of silencing producers of political knowledge and eliminating uncomfortable verifiable facts. Nonetheless, I am suggesting that paying attention to epistemic responsibility is one way we might be able to guard against slipping into being purveyors of non-knowing.

For if we are to effect the sort of reversal in thinking that Le Guin suggested is necessary for imagining a better future, then doing so with an awareness of our epistemic responsibilities is surely necessary. Granted, most political actors may not care about knowledge and truth; but my concern has not been with political actors as such. It has been with the producers of political knowledge, the interpreters of the actions and views of those political actors, namely us and our discipline of political studies. Our task as producers of political knowledge must surely be to know well in the sense that I have borrowed from Lorraine Code. Attending to epistemic responsibility is not just a good in itself. Attending to it offers a form of responsibility that may assist us in opening up a political space capable of sustaining the kinds of futures that we strive to re-imagine.

Post Script: A brief comment on the title page.
The image for the title page was excerpted from a painting (© 2022, Lana Prendergast) depicting me in the British Museum standing on the stairs that lead to the museum's restaurant/café. The larger painting captures the internal structuring of the enclosed space of the Great Court of the museum, completed in 2000 and named after the then monarch, Queen Elizabeth II. The British Museum is the knowledge heartland of what was once a global empire. It was, and perhaps still is, the home of the knowledge of empire(s) and, via the memories so stored, a place of homage to or celebration of Britain's past imperial power and that of other more chronologically distant empires. In the painting and the excerpted image I am depicted gazing across the adjacent space towards the windows of the older building, gazing over the heads of the people milling about below. The text announcing the title of the talk is also positioned so that I am looking towards it as if to affirm its essential correctness, the privileged white masculinist gaze affirming what needs to be known.

Some metres away on the stairs is a woman moving away from the masculinist centring of knowing. She is an everywoman whose identity and identifying characteristics remain unspecified, to be filled in by the viewer. She has her back turned to both the figure claiming epistemic authority and the supposed knowledge he is author-ising. She is moving beyond and above it. Her red carry bag stands out against the greys and sepia tones. It conjures a reference to Ursula Le Guin's "carrier bag 'theory' of fiction" (Le Guin 1986), a humanly alternative way of knowing and disseminating such knowledge, and perhaps of being a knower. The everywoman appears not to be taken in by the siren call of the privileged white man's authorised knowledge. She goes her own way, thereby prodding us to be epistemically cautious about pronouncements concerning political (and other) knowledge made from positions of privilege.

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