From Alternative Facts to Tentative Truths:

Towards a Post-postmodern Dialogic Epistemology

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Abstract

Drawing attention to today's epistemic crisis, this article seeks to reflect on the role of adult education in addressing this crisis and thereby fostering our democracies. We argue for the need of developing a new shared epistemic basis, a post-postmodern dialogic epistemology. This article presents three core components for this: (1) universalism and particularism, (2) embracing epistemic humility, and (3) seeking for dialogue and the public use of reason. Starting with recognizing the value of postmodern critiques on the Enlightenment ideas of rational thinking and its practices of rigid categorizations, we update key concepts of Enlightenment thinking, such as the power of judgment, human epistemic fallibility, and public reasoning. The modern value of the Enlightenment lies for us predominantly in the democratic educational project that it started. In this light, we see adult education as a (public) space dedicated to developing epistemic responsibility.

Keywords: reflective judgment, human fallibility, post-postmodernism, dialogue across differences, agora, civic friendship, dialogic epistemology

1. Introduction

The world is experiencing a crisis of epistemology. In a benign way, evidence for this predicament can be seen in the growth of conspiracy theory movements such as the Flat Earth Society, which (as its name implies) adamantly proclaims that the Earth is flat despite the abundance of evidence to the contrary. More dangerously, it can be seen in the anti-vaxx movement, wherein large swathes of people refuse the advice of all health organizations and the vast majority of epidemiologists, prolonging the covid-19 pandemic and re-introducing viruses which had been mostly eradicated. It became perhaps most visible during and since the presidency of Donald Trump, as he used Twitter to send daily barrages of messages (over 26,000, an average of 18 per day, during his four years in office), many of which proclaimed and repeated patently false information, or "alternative facts" (TrumpArchive, 2021), and then as he continues to spread disinformation about the validity and results of the 2020 election.

A characteristic of today's crisis of epistemology is that many people treat the knowledge-creation process backwards. Instead of beginning with a thoughtful framework for *how* they will determine what to believe (an epistemology relevant to the given context), they begin with *whom* or *what* they will believe, and then find justification to support corresponding knowledge claims. These preferences for *whom* and *what* determine the sources we look to for news, data, opinions, friendships, and other elements that collectively form our echo chambers. A further problem is that complex issues tend to be reduced to simplistic alternatives from which everyone is seemingly supposed to choose. This trend is especially

promoted by sensationalist news media, as well as social media consisting of memes and only limited text. We define this crisis of epistemology as a widespread lack of consensus about knowledge and how it is acquired. Haidt illustrates this tendency pithily: "Whatever you want to believe about the causes of global warming or whether a fetus can feel pain, just Google your belief" (2012, p. 87). In the case of global warming, a choice to either believe or not believe in human-induced global climate change based on one's political or religious identity— or because one believes in science—precludes deeper discussions about points of evidence for either claim, scientific bias, academic pressure and fashion, and industrial/corporate hegemony. One aspect of this crisis is the extent to which individuals are unwilling to delve deeply into the evidentiary claims of both sides of a controversial issue; another aspect has to do with more fundamental issues of living in a pluralistic society, dealing effectively with difference, and participating in social practices that contribute to an effective democracy. We call this a *crisis* because the lack of such consensus makes it difficult, if not impossible, to have constructive dialogues across difference. When we have people on various extremes of the political spectrum making determinations about 'truth' based on party affiliation, personal (perceived) interests, or the effect that such a *truth* might have (e.g., undermining traditional knowledge in hopes of combating hegemony, or 'owning the libs' in hopes of winning the culture war), the result is an abandonment of the search for truths that can be agreed upon as a basis for co-constructing a diverse, pluralistic society.

The rapid and vast availability of information makes it necessary to examine relevant facts and data about complex issues. Further, coming to a dialectical understanding of complex issues requires an epistemological approach that is open to diverse perspectives without submitting to complete relativism. Today's 'post-truth' situation therefore requires a more explicit focus on epistemology, a critical competency in dealing with vast and varied information about complex issues. Using Adorno's term, it requires "education for maturity/[autonomy]" (1970/2013), which necessitates lifelong learning.

2. Towards a Post-postmodern Dialogic Epistemology

This article addresses the individual and collective stance toward searching for or abandoning truth, and its interconnection with democracy and education. Our underlying premise is that for the maintenance of democracy as a form of government and way of life, which in principle allows participation for all in political and decision-making processes, it is indispensable that engagement, public discussion, and deliberation, as forms and prerequisites of that participation, are built on shared epistemic principles or standards. This insight is obviously not new; however, its importance is heightened by current and growing challenges related to epistemology and stances toward truth and the search for it.

Adult and lifelong education has a role to play in combating this crisis of epistemology. In order to effectively do so, however, we need to begin conversations about truth and epistemology— because the academic fashion of postmodernism leaves scholars and educators unequipped to offer the necessary solutions. Postmodernism provides a distinctive and helpful focus on power and language, on the need for a multiplicity of perspectives, and a critique of rigid categorizations and often dualistic simplifications of Enlightenment-era and modernist thought (Hemphill, 2001). In this zeal to challenge monolithic, totalizing systems of thought in the hopes of challenging hegemony, however, postmodernism neglects—and indeed may be conceptually unable—to offer constructive guidance for creating a shared epistemological basis from which to combat today's crisis of epistemology. We need a post-postmodernism, a move beyond critique and into construction. We need conceptual tools that do more than

merely say that all truths are local and serve particular interests. We need conceptions of epistemology that address postmodern critiques and yet offer workable solutions for the difficult and complex task of developing a shared epistemic base.

To this end, we have written elsewhere about renewed conceptions of rationality, autonomy, and plurality (Hoggan-Kloubert & Hoggan, in review). In the following sections, we further explore concepts to help develop a new epistemic basis, which we hope will contribute to addressing the problems of living in a post-truth world. We present three principles helpful in creating a shared epistemic basis: (1) universalism and particularism, (2) embracing epistemic humility, and (3) seeking for dialogue and the public use of reason. Following these explorations, we provide implications for adult education practice.

3. Universalism and Particularism

Whereas postmodernism critiques concepts of truth and rationality as they have evolved from the Enlightenment era, our post-postmodern reconstruction of a shared epistemology also begins with a famous critique of the Enlightenment era. Horkheimer and Adorno begin their criticism of Enlightenment's thinking with the fundamental question: "why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism" (1944/2002, p. xiv). Although Enlightenment thinking was intended to be inextricably linked with freedom, it ultimately led in a dialectical process to a lack of freedom, in a thoroughly administered world, so they argue. They speak about the 'self-destruction' of Enlightenment thought (p. xiv), while still insisting that we need to hold onto the Enlightenment as a project, albeit as a project that needs to be improved. "We have no doubt—and herein lies our petitio principii—that freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking" (1944/2002, p. xvi).

Enlightenment's version of rationality is authoritarian in its striving for order, clarity, and predictability. Its logic is that of unification and fusion (of the individual to the collective, of specifics to their categorizations—'identification'); thus, the unknown (uncategorized, unlabeled) cannot exist as such. In critiquing the prevalence of and insistence on classification as the only legitimate form of perceiving the world, Horkheimer and Adorno arrive at the claim that: "Power and knowledge are synonymous" (1944/2002, p. 2), since every cognition only follows the logic of determination for the purpose of domination. This 'calculating' and 'ordering' of things is one of the sharpest critiques in their "Dialectic of Enlightenment". Things are perceived only in the sense that they can be subordinated under the rule of logic and signs and are recorded in units/categories. The unknown, the un-calculated, and the non-categorized are neither reflected nor perceived in their differences, thus the resulting knowledge is deficient, partial, hegemonizing. When education utilizes this distorting form of knowledge-creation, it results in a 'half-education,' as famously titled by Adorno (Adorno, 1959, see also Kloubert, 2018). Horkheimer and Adorno, in their analysis of the flawed epistemology that led to the rise of fascism and the horrors of WWII, famously criticize the oppressive logic of the Enlightenment. "For enlightenment, anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility must be viewed with suspicion" (1944/2002, p. 3).

Bauman (1991) and other postmodern philosophers reject the Enlightenment ideal of rigid categories, as such distinctions necessarily exclude certain people, groups, things, or experiences. Such austerity, Bauman maintains, has been rejected in modern times by citizens in increasingly open, consumer-driven societies who feel less secure and more fearful of not fitting into rigid categories after gaining the personal freedoms of the industrialized world. Bauman emphasizes that such rigidity has resulted in what he calls "liquid modernity," which is evident, for example, in people seeking to reduce their insecurities and allay their fears

through temporal and fleeting experiences such as going to an art museum rather than, say, taking a course on art history to expand their learning or increase their knowledge (2000).

To address this critique, we return to one of the most prominent philosophers of the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant , who wrote arguably the most comprehensive texts (1790) about the ways humans acquire and process knowledge. We draw on Kant because we see in his work a useful framework for analyzing today's epistemic crisis. Kant argues that we need an individual capacity to find our orientation in the world, which he calls "power of judgment." For him, it is "the power to think the particular as contained under the universal" (1790/1987, p. 18). Kant's premise is that there is a compelling human need to make meaning, to structure the world and our experiences; the alternative would be an incoherent, random collection of disconnected phenomena. Judgment allows people to apply rules and concepts to specific cases and thus to reflect on whether something can be understood according to a given "rule," or if a new or revised rule would be necessary to adequately understand it. He describes two kinds of judgment that we use to make sense of the world.

Kant defines the *determining power of judgment* as the ability "to subsume something under rules", that is, "if the universal (the rule, principle, law) is given, then judgment, which subsumes the particular under it, is determinative" (Kant, 1790/1987/p. 18). Here we use predetermined categories or structures of understanding to make sense of our individual experiences, and thereby gain a deeper understanding of the world. Whereas Kant treated this power of judgment as a conscious process, we would argue that it is also, and much more commonly, a preconscious, automatized process. It would be impossible to function on a moment-to-moment basis without this conscious or preconscious interpreting of experience. We find therefore that critiques against the Enlightenment's focus on creating categories for understanding are problematic. The creation of categories is not only something that Enlightenment scholars chose to do as they sought scientific explanations for various phenomena, it is also an inevitable epistemological process that they made explicit. Instead of critiquing the capacity of judgement in general, we argue rather to critique the insistence that one's current framework for understanding the world is already complete and accurate, thereby using determinate judgment to force all phenomena into that preexisting structure.

As a necessary complement to the determining power of judgment, Kant describes the *reflective power of judgment* as the ability to construct new categories and patterns and form higher-order representations by paying attention to the existence of outliers that do not fit into existing categories (p. 19). This key insight is reflected in most every model of learning and development (e.g., Piaget's accommodative versus assimilative learning, Engestrom's expansive learning, Mezirow's perspective transformation). Reflective judgement pre-supposes the human capacity to question existing paradigms and modify them to create new ones. Thus, in the process of generating knowledge, human beings use existing categories to understand the context and the interconnectedness of their lived phenomena in a systematic way; but at the same time people are not restricted solely to the existing rigid structures, continuing the 'search for truth' by recognizing and defining new nuances and interconnections.

In addition to these two *powers of judgement* described by Kant, we see the necessity of recognizing and appreciating the uniqueness of some phenomena, what we might call the respect for singularity. This respect acknowledges that no matter how refined any given belief system that we create is, it will never completely match the complexity of reality. Therefore, there is an essential intermediary step before the process of reflective judgement, where

phenomena are acknowledged as not fitting into our current framework for understanding (or better yet, phenomena show that our current framework is not adequate to explain them). What is essential for responsible epistemic practice is that we allow for and pay attention to singularities, holding them as outliers to our existing mental frameworks, and yet not abandoning the difficult work of reflective judgment, of trying to create better, more expansive frameworks for understanding that can accommodate the current outliers.

Despite its helpful critiques of power and language, postmodernism's insistence and exclusive focus on particularity does not provide conceptual tools for developing a shared epistemic basis. We argue that this is due to its reluctance to create categories for understanding, to prohibit any generalizations that might seek coherence among the various perceived phenomena. And yet, not only is the creation of categories an inevitable part of moment-to-moment human functioning, claiming not to do such simply renders the process invisible and inhibits our ability to engage in dialogue across difference. Metaphorically, acknowledging that every flower in the world is particular is one thing, to abandon the concept of flowers in general is another. This not only makes our worldview fragmentary and inaccurate, it undermines our ability to engage in a dialogue about the tremendous variety of flowers around the world.

To explore further the need for reflective judgment, we return to Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of the "impoverishment of thought" (1944/2002, p. 28) that comes through thinking in rigid categories (i.e., determining judgment), when not able to broaden one's own perception and recognize nuances and differences. Thinking, caught in this logic, allows people to overlook phenomena that do not fit into their current organizing mental structures. Thus, it can convert distinct and nuanced experiences, phenomena, and even people, into identical conceptions or categories by forcing them into existing, rigid, organizing mental structures. As they explain, for a claim to be easily accepted as truth by the masses, it "need only be general, self-assured, universal, and imperative. What people cannot endure is the attempt to evade the either/or" (1944/2002, p. 198). This shows the modern unwillingness to do the hard work of attempting reflective judgment. This feature of modern thinking, therefore, negates open cognitive processes such as Kant's reflective judgment.

When thinking is limited to the already-given, then people cannot make judgments to accommodate phenomena that do not coincide with the existing structures of understanding. Further, when it is constrained by the insistence of a logical formalism that declares the supremacy of general rules and categories (and the resulting subservience of singularity to those higher structures), then reductive thinking cannot account for instances of singularity and particularity. In either case, such thinking is a priori less reflective of reality than what might be possible when such constraints are not present.

> *What appears as the triumph of subjectivity, the subjection of all existing things to logical formalism, is bought with the obedient subordination of reason to what is immediately at hand (existing categories, the authors). To grasp existing things as such (i.e., as within existing categories, the authors), …, but, on the contrary, to think of them … as mediated conceptual moments which are only fulfilled by revealing their social, historical, and human meaning—this whole aspiration of knowledge is abandoned. Knowledge does not consist in mere perception, classification, and calculation. (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/2002, p. 20). [And further:] The regression of the masses today lies in their inability to hear with their own ears what has not already been heard,*

to touch with their hands what has not previously been grasped; it is the new form of blindness. (p. 28-29).

The impoverishment of thought thus leads to the impoverishment of the self/human being. This is manifested in modern society through either isolation, on the one hand, or in self-identification with the collective on the other. In this process, thinking loses what constitutes its essence: the capacity for reflection and differentiation. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the capacity to see differences is in contrast to, what they call, identification, the process of making different things identical in our perception. If human beings are characterized only through the prism of categories, the subjective, individual side of his human existence, the emotional and sensual life, then: "The autocratic intellect […] detaches itself from sensuous experience in order to subjugate it" (1944,/2002, p. 28).

The mere ordering, classification, and calculation do not, therefore, acknowledge the interconnection between the universal (broad, organizing structures) and the particular (singularity), taking only the perspective of the universal—of the "false absolute" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/2002, p. 33). This tension between the particular and universal can be at least *partially* solved by returning to Kant's concepts of determining and reflective power of judgement, as discussed above. In both cases, every human being needs direct experience to judge, but it is especially the reflective power of judgment that has its necessary starting point in concrete individual experience.

We highlight the need to generalize particular phenomena, to transcend the limitations of purely subjective experiences and perspectives, but, in line with Horkheimer and Adorno, we see here the danger of oversimplification and homogenization ('identification'). Therefore, we have suggested that respect for singularity needs to be added to Kant's determinant and reflective powers of judgement. In fairness to Kant, he also noted that universal principles, rules, and laws cannot be applied as if they were the 'laws of nature' (Kant, 1970/1987, p. 25); all systems of belief are human creations and therefore can be modified. We would add to this that although general categories, grand narratives, and universal laws are helpful in providing an explanation of the world, we must remain open to the fact that no belief system can possibly accommodate all phenomena and experiences; within the general there is always the need to notice singularity. The work of reflective judgment is never complete.

Today's epistemic crisis can be understood as the neglect of reflective judgment. First, we see an insistence on determinant judgement, where people in their echo chambers subsume all phenomena under their particular framework for understanding the world (i.e., their existing categories), without engaging in reflective judgment based on a recognition of differences, including arguments from those in other echo chambers. Second, we see a postmodern insistence on treating all phenomena as particular and therefore as not universally judgeable. For example, discriminatory practices against women in Western societies are ubiquitously decried, while at the same time discriminatory (and often brutal) practices against women in non-Western societies are shielded from critique out of an insistence on the primacy of the local, rather than hegemonic Western, culture in evaluating those practices (Wheen, 2012).

Many of the critiques under the auspices of postmodernism concern the point that the striving to find universal principles, rules, and laws was an inherently flawed goal, that much of what was considered universal was, in truth, merely cultural conditioning. We critique postmodernism's proclamation (that includes such claims as that there are no grand narratives, and that all truth is local and particular) as hypocritical because it is itself treated as a universal law. Worse yet, it is treated as a law that cannot be brought under scrutiny. To

make such a universal statement that disallows any further universal statements, is akin to crossing a bridge and then burning it down behind you. Any attempt to understand reality always includes assumptions about the universal; even assuming that all truths are local still assumes *that* as a universal principle. The key, we believe, is in how the universal is treated (how it comes to be and how it is held tentatively or dogmatically).

4. Embracing Epistemic Humility

The second concept in our epistemological framework addresses the imperfection of our cognition and the fallibility of the human mind. We acknowledge the fact that we will always fail to find 'universal truth' as such, because we are imperfect epistemological beings. Whether we draw upon rational or extra-rational (e.g., intuition, somatic knowing) capacities to seek understanding, we not only can never be assured of understanding the truth in all its completeness and complexity, we can only be sure that no matter how hard we try, we will never be able to do so. However, it is precisely this fallibility that requires us to search for truth by addressing and evaluating knowledge claims carefully and holding truths tentatively.

The idea that human beliefs, knowledge, and perceptions are fragmented, distorted, and one-sided is obviously not a new idea. One of the most detailed accounts of fallibility was developed by Karl Popper, who rejects dogmatism and believes that, contrary to positivists, that science should not, via experimentation, be required to prove a theory to be true—only that the theory conceivably be false (in other words, they should simply seek to disprove a theory). *Fallibilism* assumes that all human concepts and ideas are incapable of being completely proven. In general, there is no way to create a perfectly-true theory, to definitively secure the truth of any given hypothesis. While defending this position, Popper does not slide into relativism. Even if the security of knowing the truth is not achievable, it is nevertheless possible to disprove ideas, hypotheses, and concepts, which implies that we should hold our ideas and systems of beliefs tentatively and approach them from a critical perspective, aware of the necessity of constant scrutiny (Popper 1945/1966a and b).

This choice, to hold belief systems tentatively, can and should nevertheless be based on epistemologically justifiable reasons rather than arbitrariness. The search for truth does not necessarily have to mean the search for certainty, despite a long history of equating the two in the philosophy literature (Pasnau, 2017). Popper warns against dogmatism and relativism, both of which prevent us from engaging in a critical examination of our belief systems (Popper 1945/1966a). Within a relativist framework one could not justifiably criticize and reject any competing assumptions as false. If all beliefs and assumptions are equally right, there is no point in critical thinking or any other kind of epistemological evaluation.

The idea of fallibilism by Popper is connected to his concepts of democracy. It is an indispensable requirement for his concept of the 'open society,' where the possibility of criticism and discussion is unrestricted by states or authorities. (The opposite is a closed society, characterized by rigidity, collectivism, and dogmatism and an apparent certainty of knowing the truth.) This idea of the open society is conceived by Popper explicitly as his contribution to the fight against totalitarianism, especially National Socialism, but then also communism. Popper described his concept of an "open society" as one that ensures and protects such values as freedom, justice, the right to strive for and disseminate knowledge, but also the right to make a personal choice in favor a particular value system and to strive for one's own happiness (Popper, 1945/1966a, chapter 10). Citizens in an open society are confronted with the need to make choices, to evaluate arguments and evidence, and to improve their own beliefs and values. This stands in contrast to closed societies wherein

particular sets of beliefs (mostly tribal or collective) are intentionally framed as being immutable, and where beliefs should be "transmitted" and "accepted"—by force, if necessary—but not deliberated upon (Popper, 1945/1966a, p. 100 and 172).

Popper explains that "the transition from the closed society to the open occurs when social institutions are first consciously recognized as human-made, and when their conscious alteration is discussed in terms of their suitability for the achievement of human aims or purposes (Popper, 1945/1966a, p. 175). In other words, the open society begins with the recognition of human fallibility and thus the need to reflect and improve, to search for reasonable alternatives. Popper recognizes that for some, such permanent uncertainty may be terrifying, and the desire to withdraw from this process of constant epistemic critique is understandable. However, each of us bears responsibility for our decisions, not only political leaders. Lastly, he warns that there is always a danger, perhaps even a tendency, for free and open societies to gradually slip back into closed ones.

Engaging in constant critique is for Popper the only way to improve our societies. An implication of human fallibility is that we can never know all the consequences of our actions in advance, much less whether they will result in a worse social and political order than what currently exists. He therefore rejected "holistic" macrolevel plans and designs (planning on a grand scale, such as Hegel or Plato suggested), preferring "piecemeal" tactics and step-by-step improvement. Since we cannot know in advance all the effects of our interventions, he advises us to work on each social problem individually and piece by piece (Popper, 1945 1966b, p 381, 386). We acknowledge Popper's caution about the seriousness with which we must address human fallibility. In this view, it is much more important to be aware and critical of our belief systems, tackling societal challenges with consideration of their social and historical context and possibilities for their remedy rather than dogmatically applying a particular belief system, no matter how well intentioned. In taking this approach, people, especially in open societies, are morally obliged to take epistemic responsibility, to critically assess their belief systems because their implications bear risks that could cause harm.

The awareness of human fallibility has consequences for the organization of and interaction between citizens in our societies (i.e., the ways we live together). If in our private and public deliberations we genuinely acknowledge the possibility of our own mistakes, then we allow for the possibility that others' arguments or perspectives may actually be more valid than our own. This type of subjective insight mitigates or replaces the dogmatic righteousness that has been expressed in the mainstream recently, including Trumpism and anti-vaxxers cited earlier. Acknowledging our fallibility can motivate us to seek better, stronger, more carefully reasoned evidence from which to form judgments and to be willing to learn from each other by being mindful of nuances and by correcting our assumptions and beliefs. It emphasizes the importance of open thinking, pluralism, and imagination in developing new solutions to problems.

Our knowledge is always only provisional; we should hold our truths tentatively. At any time we have to expect that supposedly safe assumptions will have to be refuted and replaced by other views. We can use Popper's argument to emphasize the danger of the modern closed communication channels, such as echo chambers, as communicative spheres in which like-minded people mutually reinforce their certainties. An external corrective is here absent. Overestimating the strength of one's own epistemic position is a great obstacle on the path to knowledge. Fallibilism, conversely, can be considered as a responsible epistemic position;

it recognizes the imperfection of knowledge without abdicating epistemic responsibility with the relativist conclusion that all beliefs are equally valid.

Popper, while recognizing human fallibility, emphasizes at the same time that he is not in favor an unavoidable determinism: "Thus we are not (as Kant and also Hume thought) the victims of our 'human nature,' of our mental digestive apparatus, of our psychology or physiology. We are not forever the prisoners of our minds. We can learn to criticize ourselves and so to transcend ourselves" (Popper, 1983/2005), p. 154). For him, "Rational discussion and critical thinking are not like the more primitive systems of interpreting the world; they are not a framework to which we are bound and tied. On the contrary, they are the means of breaking out of the prisons—of liberating ourselves" (p. 155). For Popper, human beings are creators, even if fallible ones—we construct our knowledge, our worlds, our societies which are never perfect, but we take responsibility to constantly improve them through, among other things, critical reflection. Such a disposition, when taken seriously, leads to critical dialogue, and potentially the modification or refinement of the existing patterns and ways of thinking and acting for living together in our plural, incomplete, imperfect, but open societies.

5. Seeking for Dialogue and the Public Use of Reason

Coming from Popper's belief that "I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort, we may get nearer to the truth" (1945/1966b, p. 225), we come to the third aspect of this article. We start with the assumption that getting and evaluating knowledge is best accomplished as a communicative, interactive process because given information almost always invites multiple interpretations, more than one of which is reasonable. For the effective functioning of an open, pluralistic, democratic society, people who claim to know and communicate the "truth" must provide reasons and evidence. This insistence is based on an ethical position of respect for human's dignity and autonomy; else, there would be no purpose in genuinely engaging in interaction over differences. Respecting human dignity and autonomy includes the recognition of one's fellow citizens as epistemic agents, as autonomous subjects who are capable of making up their own minds in a responsible way, and who necessarily should have a voice in matters that affect them. Engaging in a dialogue as autonomous and (politically) equal participants, contributes, according to Arendt, to the humanization of the world. To formulate this more poetically: "For the world is not humane just because it is made by human beings, and it does not become humane just because the human voice sounds in it, but only when it has become the object of discourse." (Arendt, 1968, p. 24).

Whether on internet forums or in town hall meetings, the moral imperative for people who claim to know the "truth" in open societies is for them to provide logical evidence, and not just emotional claims or claims of false authority (i.e., "Trump says. . . .) when expressing opinions as facts; such obligation does not imply that even logical evidence along will lead to consensus. Even so, this expectation promotes democratic deliberation, whereas those who make knowledge claims with scant evidence and false authority are preventing such democratic deliberation.

To make democratic deliberation possible, we need places: public spaces ("agoras"), where people come together to address issues of mutual concern, to work together in solving important problems. In this mutuality, we overcome the limits of private perspectives. We need public spaces that allow and promote dialogue, cooperation, deliberation about concepts and phenomena, and encouragement of critical thinking among people, even across ideological divides. In these spaces, it must therefore be socially acceptable to demand that truth claims are supported by evidence and reasoning that a rational person could rationally

accept and use as a basis of forming their own judgments. Solving this crisis of epistemology is about exposing ourselves to a constant dialogue that stimulates thought and reflection based on others making reasonable arguments for and against others' claims without reductive dogmatism.

Rawls emphasized that it is crucial to "specify the nature of the political relation in a constitutional democratic regime as one of civic friendship" (Rawls, 1999, p. 579). Similarly, Levine speaks of 'civic relationships,' which, unlike familial, romantic, or other personal relationships, is inclusive, prone to diversity, and built on a foundation of addressing mutual concerns. It does not require civility in terms of politeness and withholding of sharp emotions, but rather mutual recognition of "the other person as a fellow citizen, seen as someone who should be encouraged to participate in the common life" (2013, p.56). The public use of reason has been criticized in the literature because of concerns about the difficulty, if not impossibility, of full, equal, and fair participation by all parties (see for example, Young, 2000; Gutmann & Thompson, 1990). Another justification for an epistemology of public discourse—beyond aiming to improve society through its moral and political dimensions—is that it contributes to the mutual education of citizens by citizens who learn from each other in the process of critical discourse. Kant refers to such ways of discourse-inspired knowledge and learning as "enlightenment," which he conceives of as the progression from "immaturity," or a state of "tutelage," wherein people are unable to use their powers of reason without the guidance of someone else, to a state of "maturity," where autonomous thought becomes possible. Admitting that many people would rather stay in their state of immaturity, he emphasized that remaining in this state is neither natural nor unavoidable. Through dialogue with others (public use of reason), we can liberate ourselves from it.

> *It is difficult for every single human being to work his way out of his immaturity, that has almost become second nature to him.... Hence, there are only very few who have succeeded through their own intellectual toil in emerging from immaturity […]. It is much more likely that an entire public should enlighten itself; indeed it is nearly unavoidable if one allows it the freedom to do it.* (Kant, 1784/2006, p. 18).

We see here the special role and obligation of adult education to contribute to people realizing and enacting the democratic ideal of open societies of supporting and offering places in which full and equal participation in dialogue is encouraged (which is known in the literature under different terms, most notably Habermas' "ideal speech situation"). Adult education can encourage and enable learners to find and articulate their own voices, to develop interconnected thinking, and to feel themselves empowered and capable of communication and action, abiding by and insisting upon standards of reciprocity and mutual respect. Even if it is impossible to achieve a perfect culture of learning and dialogue in educational contexts, the ideals and goals stated here are those to which public discourse can and should strive.

This enlightenment project as described above is thus a prerequisite for democracy, with the caveat that one cannot simply "be enlightened," but must enlighten themselves. The first option, to be enlightened, would be too close to indoctrination and propaganda, where a person is pushed to a (pedagogically predefined) goal. Although education is made possible by various social structures, the direction and the result of the education processes for adults cannot be determined beforehand and at the same time be free of indoctrination; such concepts are mutually exclusive and negate each other. For us, then, rationality is in principle bound to public discourse, whereby the public is conceived as a space for the kinds of dialogue in which citizens deliberate about truth claims and the ensuing implications, narratives, and

conclusions emanating from them without isolating, offending, harming, or excoriating their fellow citizens.

We would add that the commitment to citizens giving and expecting reasonable evidence and argument in public spaces does not have to be antagonistic. If approached with the intention of striving to get closer to the truth (as opposed to trying to win a debate), such discourse has the potential to create a supra-individual relationship, a feeling of mutual recognition and solidarity. We juxtapose this interactive function with solitary reasoning that leads to greater atomization of society; it is a mutual searching rather than an attempt to dominate or to impose one's beliefs on others. It holds the potential for the creation of a certain kind of relationship among the participants of the public sphere.

> *What love is in its own, narrowly circumscribed sphere, respect is in the larger domain of human affairs. Respect, not unlike the Aristotelian philia politike, is a kind of "friendship" without intimacy and without closeness; it is a regard for the person from the distance which the space of the world puts between us.* (Arendt, 1958, p. 243)

Arendt is certainly not so naïve as to suggest that public participation (use of reason) will make all the people love each other and come to a universal consensus. Rather, her point is that engaging in dialogue with different, unique people in public spaces is a constant process in a specific space that entails searching for what is known and unknown and requires the capacity to form and be empowered by social bonds, as well as being open to multiple ways of living in an open diversified society.

6. Discussion and Implications

Referring to the ideals and principles rooted in the Enlightenment (power of judgment, public use of reason) and those developed by scholars empathetic with the Enlightenment (Popper, Rawls, Arendt) does not mean we are blind to the critiques against them. As demonstrated above, we acknowledge the validity and applicability of many such arguments. We argue that although the complete Truth can never be fully attained, yet the abandonment of the search for truth means arbitrariness and epistemic irresponsibility, and it leads to our inability to function in a pluralistic open society. Further, it does not provide us with the tools necessary to combat today's epistemic crisis. We call, therefore, for a new project dedicated to the development of a post-postmodern dialogic epistemology.

Contrary to many critiques, the ideals and principles of the Enlightenment, committed to the search for truth, were not the cause of the world's many evils, including the control and exploitation so rampant over the last several centuries (as if evil, control, and exploitation were new phenomena). In fact, we consider those ideals and principles essential for democratic societies to survive and thrive. Aspirations such as Kant's "emergence (of human beings) from self-incurred immaturity" (1784/2006, p. 17), are by definition a never-ending project, within one's own lifetime, and certainly from generation to generation.

The education for which we advocate would prepare adults to participate in public dialogic spaces. This includes teaching for reflecting judgment and fostering civic friendship, helping learners to pay attention to singularities that are not explainable through current mental frameworks and to mutually engage in processes of trying to create more expansive frameworks capable of nuanced, respectful understandings of those singularities. It involves demonstration and expectation of epistemic humility, even criticality of dominant views, as well as an openness to marginalized and locally-unpopular perspectives.

It is based on a democratic vision of society in which people live together in a conversational process that requires "mature" (in a Kantian sense) citizens who are able to judge evidence and reason for themselves and still develop a sense of solidarity with one another. Education is understood here as a permanent attempt to understand the world and ourselves and be capable of acting in it. In this tradition, one of the main conditions of education is that it occurs amidst a plurality of voices engaging with each other in critical dialogue. This includes confronting and dealing with perspectives that are new or opposed to one's own, but doing so in a spirit of solidarity and civic friendship.

This education presupposes a willingness of engaged citizens to look behind the metaphorical scenes of their own thinking and to devote themselves to asking and seeking answers to difficult questions. It is natural to resist a constant questioning of ourselves, especially our worldviews, in which we often find comfort and familiarity, and that serve as the basis for most of our social spheres. Yet, such education requires a willingness to have uncomfortable conversations while still speaking respectfully with those with whom we disagree. Most of all, this education requires us to acknowledge our own limitations and fallibility. Such an education is collaborative, it need not be antagonistic, but rather based on solidarity and dialogue. It involves speakers and listeners asking their dialogical partners for their reasons and beliefs and making a case for their own. In this sense, education means being epistemically responsible with truth claims (Hoggan & Kloubert, 2020; Michelson, 2019). It cannot strive predominantly for reaching agreement and consensus, as realities of (legitimate) plurality of views and human fallibility preclude such possibilities. In contrast, it strives to develop better, more nuanced, more self-critical and -reflective and yet differently-thinking thinkers who can step into dialogue with others based on a foundation of shared epistemic principles.

To cling to our views in isolation, or to only evaluate them within the confines of our preferred echo chambers, free from disagreement, is not only epistemically irresponsible, it also undermines democratic society. The tendency to disregard opposing views, labelling them as hateful, hurtful, naïve, or otherwise unworthy of serious attention, abdicates personal responsibility for dealing with the differences which are inevitable in a pluralistic society and places the responsibility for dealing with differences onto only those who have views and values different from one's own. And when everyone holds this attitude, democracy cannot function.

The modern value of the Enlightenment lies for us predominantly in the democratic educational project that it requires. We argue that this project must apply to itself what it criticizes: foremost, reasonable criticism of reason and acknowledging its limitations. It should become a self-reflecting Enlightenment. And, of necessity also a self-critical Enlightenment that remains open to the yet unknown and subjectively perceived, to the Other as a "civic friend" despite differences, always trying to understand the world in its unity and diversity.

Wolfgang Klafki, whose ideas are reflective of our own, argues that the principles of the Enlightenment are still valid and worth pursuing: they simply need updating, or, as he says, they "have to be rethought and developed further" (1990, p. 91). He emphasizes the importance of addressing the "key problems of the present and the supposed future" and formulates the crucial attitudes and skills to be able to meet the ideals of the Enlightenment today (1990, p. 98). We believe this attitude echoes our three points developed in the article: the need for reasoned judgement, the embracing of epistemic humility, and the need for public use of reason and dialogue across differences in the presence and recognition of

plurality. Klafki's four key competencies that need to be addressed in the process of constant learning are: (1) Critical faculty (including the readiness and ability for self-critique); (2) Ability and willingness to reason publicly; (3) Empathy (as a genuine readiness to maintain processes of 'argumentative elaboration and reasoned consensus, not necessarily treating all perspectives as equal); and (4) Cross-linked thinking and the ability to contextualize (recognizing interconnections between different ideas and phenomena (1990, p. 98-99).

In this sense, education cannot be understood as only an individual pursuit, but as a result of engaging in common discourse about the past, present, and future issues that a community or society faces. Education throughout life therefore means developing our capacity for judgment and epistemic responsibility—and adjusting them throughout one's life in dialogue with others. Public reasoning and the formation of our own judgments and beliefs thus become dialogical, and are social rather than individual. Yet, education also means the ability to make autonomous judgments and, in Adorno's words, "the courage not to participate" (Adorno, 1970/2013), the ability to withstand the dominant views, principles, and ideas of the masses, the ability to be non-conformist. In Kantian terms: the central virtue of the mature individual is courage; the mature agent is one who dares to use their own understanding.

In light of these arguments, we also highlight that learning to live together in a free society is neither value-free nor relativistic. Rather, it is partisan in the sense of advocating for one's views while simultaneously being open to alternative views. It benefits, and perhaps requires, certain epistemic principles, namely those that are founded on the basis of public reasoning, solidarity, and recognition of our own fallibility, and this is based on the constant questioning of that which we hold as truth. Without this, we believe, an open society cannot be built.

7. Conclusion

Differences in opinions, life concepts, and belief systems are not only inevitable in our heterogeneous societies, they are desirable. The existence of such divergence and diversity, however, begs the question how we might learn to live together (and, perhaps even "love" together as Arendt would have us do) across such differences without drifting into indifference, relativism, atomization, or societal radicalization. How can we create a basis for dialogue and thereby address the current epistemic crisis that is such a danger for our democracies? In this article, we argued for a return to, rather than rejection of, the Enlightenment principles of determining and reflective judgment, combined with an embracing of epistemological humility, and an emphasis on intersubjective reasoning.

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