

**Transformative Experimentation, Perspectival Diversity,
and the Polycentric Liberal Order**
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Abstract

Proponents of political experiments in living, such as Elizabeth Anderson and Ryan Muldoon, often emphasize their potential to generate useful observational data about the relation between social rules and ethically desirable outcomes. This paper highlights another epistemic dimension of political experiments: their potential to transform the cognitive perspectives of participants. I argue that this transformative dimension of experimentation offers an endogenous societal mechanism for increasing perspectival diversity. I explore the implications of this mechanism for institutional design.

1. Introduction

The idea of experiments in living, first articulated by John Stuart Mill, plays an important role in the epistemic justification of liberal institutions. Mill believed that learning more about the good life requires “testing” different ways of living. Contemporary political philosophers, such as Elizabeth Anderson (1991) and Ryan Muldoon (2015), interpret and extend the Millian case for social and political experimentation. Legal and political theorists have similarly advocated, on epistemic grounds, for governance systems that permit and promote experimentation (Dorf and Sabel 1988, Pennington 2011).

Another idea much discussed in the liberal tradition concerns the epistemic value of diversity. A number of social scientists and philosophers suggest, on both theoretical and empirical grounds, that heterogeneous groups and societies can use their diversity as an epistemic resource, giving them an epistemic advantage over more homogeneous groups/societies.

Political experimentation and perspectival diversity can both benefit society epistemically. Is there any systematic relation between the two, or are they separate sources of

epistemic benefit? Initially, one might think that they are indeed two separate things. Diversity, or the degree of societal heterogeneity, is an exogenous fact about the composition of society. Experimentation, meanwhile, is a societal *choice* about how to organize our social and political arrangements.

One way of pushing back against the above is to point out that the level of diversity is not exogenous to our institutional arrangements because it is partly the result of our immigration policy. To increase diversity and enjoy its epistemic benefits, we need to relax restrictions on immigration, or indeed subsidize it. This interjection is surely correct. Notice, however, that it does not relate diversity to experimentation but to immigration. More broadly, it suggests that to increase its diversity, a society needs to look elsewhere for help, it cannot generate more diversity *endogenously*, in a strong sense of the term.

In this paper, I will argue that experimentation and diversity are in fact related. More specifically, I will suggest that enabling certain kinds of experimentation can in turn increase the level of perspectival diversity across society. Experiments in living, in other words, can serve as an endogenous mechanism through which a society increases its diversity. Bringing into view this mechanism, I will suggest, offers a new and important way of epistemically evaluating different forms of political organization and experimentation.

A key piece in my argument is a distinction I draw between the *observational* and the *transformative* dimensions of experimentation. Experiments can be evaluated from the observational perspective based on their potential to produce empirical data bearing on the relation between social rules and social outcomes. Experiments can also be evaluated from the transformative perspective based on their potential to change the way persons categorize and understand the world. Attending to the transformative dimension of experiments brings into view

the relation between experimentation and diversity and provides a social epistemic reason to allow greater degrees of experimentation.

My argument will proceed as follows. The next section reviews the philosophical literature on experiments in living. Section 3 introduces the two epistemic dimensions of experimentation: observational and transformative. I point out the importance of attending to the latter. Section 4 fleshes out the transformative dimension by relating political experiments to the idea of transformative experience. I also unpack some of the details of the mechanism from political experimentation to perspectival change. Section 5 reviews the literature on the benefits of perspectival diversity and highlights the philosophical significance of attending to the relation between experimentation and diversity. Section 6 examines the institutional implications of the preceding discussion. There is a concluding section.

2. Experiments in Living

The modern idea of experiments in living originates with the work of John Stuart Mill. In the third chapter of *On Liberty*, Mill draws an analogy between diversity of thought, produced via freedom of expression; and diversity of practices, created by practical experimentation.¹ As in the case of thought and speech, Mill claims that experimentation and subsequent diversity in practices yields epistemic progress. In particular, he believes, the value of different lifestyles can best be judged by observing their realizations. Indeed, as Elizabeth Anderson (1991) observes, Mill considered his own lived experience to be an empirical test of different versions of

¹ As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, so it is that there should be different experiments in living; that free scope should be given to varieties of characters, short of injury to others; and that the worth of different modes of life should be proved practically, when one thinks fit to try them. (Mill 1991: 63).

utilitarianism (Bentham's and his own). His ethical conclusions are thus grounded in experimentation and observation.

An early adaptation of the Millian view to the question of political organization is captured in a well-known statement by Justice Brandeis (1932), according to which:

Denial of the right to experiment may be fraught with serious consequences to the nation. It is one of the happy incidents of the federal system that a single courageous state may, if its citizens choose, serve as a laboratory; and try novel social and economic experiments without risk to the rest of the country.

It is natural to draw the parallel between Justice Brandeis's defense of political experimentation at the level of individual *states* and Mill's defense of experiments in living at the level of individual *people*.

Robert Nozick, another notable defender of political experimentation, makes the case in part III of *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974: 297-334), for what he calls a 'meta-utopia'. The main idea underlying the conception of a meta-utopia is that our epistemic situation vis-à-vis the key social goals of justice and the good life is not one of solid knowledge and understanding. According to Nozick, when it comes to these core values, and the question of how they can best be achieved institutionally, we are more like cavemen than Gods (313-14). As Nozick explains, it is hard to believe that *one* way of living together is best for everyone, and harder still to believe we *currently* know what that way is. We should design our institutions as a 'filtering device' where practical experiments are regularly conducted and evaluated.²

² Nozick distinguishes between 'designed' and 'filtering' devices. In the former, the planners aim to bring about a specific end-state they have in mind.

The Millian viewpoint figures importantly in recent philosophical work that finds Rawlsian public reason an unsatisfactory conception of political justification.³ A leading theorist for this view is Ryan Muldoon, who argues that:

Increasing diversity, rather than being a challenge to political justification, is in fact an advantage, as it increases our ability to conduct a range of experiments in living that help us better understand the nature of successful social arrangements. (2015: 180).

Like Mill, and unlike Rawls, Muldoon favors dynamic arrangements that change and evolve through continuous experimentation, rather than ones that persist stably under an overlapping societal consensus.

Echoing Muldoon, Julian Müller (2019) argues that the central error of the public reason tradition is the attempt to “tame”, as opposed to use as a resource, the underlying diversity of society.⁴ The polycentric democracy Müller favors centers on the ideas of political innovation, competition, and experimentation.⁵ Experiments, according to Müller, are valuable for three main reasons (3-4): (i) they enable “discovering new heights”, i.e., better ways of living together, better modus vivendi arrangements; (ii) they reduce “shallow disagreement”: experimental evidence can reduce disagreement about non-normative facts; and (iii) they defuse “deep disagreement”: achievable by allowing those who reasonably disagree about the right and the good to live in communities that better approximate their conception of justice and the good life.⁶

³ This line of criticism offered by proponents of political experimentation could also be targeted against Rawls’s original theory of justice as presented in *A Theory of Justice* (1971). The focus on the view Rawls expounds in *political liberalism* (1993) is helpful for dialectical purposes.

⁴ For Müller, this results in the endorsement of modus vivendi arrangements which “entail both mutual benefit and an overlapping dissatisfaction.” (p. 12).

⁵ “I define polycentric democracy as an institutional arrangement involving a multiplicity of polities acting independently, but under the constraints of a democratically supervised framework for institutional competition.” (Müller 2019: 3).

⁶ A similar set of arguments can be found in Vallier (2018). For a Hayekian perspective reaching similar conclusions see Pennington (2011) and Kogelmann (2018).

3. Experimentation: Two Dimensions of Epistemic Value

Theorists from Mill to Muldoon, in defending experimentation on epistemic grounds, focus on the *observational dimension* of experimentation. This perspective evaluates experiments in terms of their potential to produce empirical data that can be used to identify causal relationships between social variables of interest. A typical experiment, viewed observationally, might indicate how changing a rule x affects a metric of ethical concern y . For example, an experiment might try to assess the relation between legalizing the sale of drugs and public health. Or, more broadly, such an experiment may shed light on the relation between drug legalization and abstract moral categories such as human well-being and social justice. The key question, from the observational perspective, is how to design experiments such that they can produce data amenable to such causal analysis.

Notwithstanding the significance of the observational dimension, experiments can also produce epistemic value in what I call the *transformative dimension* of experimentation. From this perspective, the epistemic value of experimentation is not that it produces data amenable to causal analysis (though it might), but rather that it changes how persons see and understand the world. These changes in cognitive perspective in turn affect persons' potential to contribute to the wider epistemic society.

The transformative perspective, unlike the observational, locates the epistemic value of experimentation in the *generative* capacity of persons who participate or observe the experiment, as opposed to the impersonal data that experiments produce. In the case of the observational perspective, the data generated can, in principle, be processed and analyzed by any interested inquirer, regardless of their personal experiences. In the transformative case, the gains of experimentation accrue to persons by virtue of their personal experiences vis-à-vis the

experiment.⁷ Put differently, the benefit of the observational dimension is to generate data, while the benefit of the transformative dimension is to produce novel ways of processing and evaluating available data.

Another important sense in which the transformative perspective locates epistemic value differently from the observational perspective has to do with the subject matter in which epistemic progress is achieved. If we think back to the philosophers defending experimentation, they all point to the potential of experiments to uncover important insights about *justice* and *the good*. And, indeed, if experiments are evaluated from the observational perspective, their epistemic benefit is to teach us about what rules lead to just and good outcomes. Viewed from the transformative perspective, however, experiments can be epistemically beneficial with regard to any of a great multitude of subject matters. Experiments, through transforming persons' perspectives, can lead to new ideas and thus to epistemic progress in visual art, poetry, literature, architecture, cookery, science, and many more areas of human inquiry and exploration.

As philosophers and normative social theorists, we think a great deal about justice and the good life. It is therefore quite natural for us to consider the epistemic utility of experiments in terms of making advances in these all-important topics. Without discounting the significance of making epistemic progress in justice and the good, attending to the transformative dimension reminds us of the possibility and significance of epistemic progress in areas not directly related to them.

⁷ The primary transformative effects would naturally accrue to persons who undergo the experiment but they can also accrue to observers of the experiment whose perspectives change meaningfully due to witnessing the experiment.

4. Transformative Political Experiments

The previous section introduced the idea that experiments in living have the potential to transform persons who undergo them. I suggested that this hitherto undertheorized dimension of experimentation carries important theoretical implications. In this section, I want to flesh out in greater detail the mechanism by which political experiments transform persons. The exposition proceeds in two steps. First, I review the scholarly literature on transformative experience. Then, I sketch the particular transformative mechanism vis-à-vis political experiments.

Transformative Experience. The phenomenon of personal transformation is of interest to philosophers and decision theorists for several reasons. There is a puzzle about how to model the decision of whether to pursue transformative experiences within the framework of rational choice theory (Ullmann-Margalit 2006; Paul 2014; Callard 2018). Related to this puzzle is the question of whether and how transformative experiences are epistemically revelatory, i.e., are instrumental in acquiring certain kinds of knowledge (Paul 2014; Jackson 1986). Transformative experiences also raise metaphysical questions of personal identity and temporal persistence (Crone 2020), as well as ethical questions regarding authenticity and social justice (Paul 2015a, 2015b; Barnes 2015). For the purposes of my investigation, I need not enter into all the theoretical puzzles the phenomenon raises. The point I aim to establish is that certain kinds of political experiments can be plausibly regarded as transformative experiences.

To get a sense of the nature of transformative experience and some illustrative examples, I refer to the work of L.A Paul, a leading theorist of this phenomenon. In her book *Transformative Experience* (2014), she distinguishes between three related types of experiences. In Paul's terminology, an experience is referred to as 'epistemically transformative' if

undergoing it gives one knowledge not otherwise obtainable.⁸ An experience is labeled ‘personally transformative’ if it fundamentally changes your point of view, including your core preferences (p. 16). Paul uses the term ‘transformative experience’ to denote the conjunct of the first two types, i.e., experiences that are both epistemically and personally transformative (p. 17).

Although Paul opens her book with a fanciful example of becoming a vampire as illustrating the puzzles related to transformative experiences, it is important to point out that transformative experiences are very much a part of real life. Indeed, Paul goes on to discuss realistic examples such as the experience of marriage (p. 95), becoming a parent (p. 93), pursuing a career path (p. 98), or fighting in a war (p. 53).

The term ‘experiments in living’ denotes a wide array of individual and social phenomena. If we ask the pertinent question, are political experiments transformative experiences (as understood by Paul and others), it is evident that a reasonable reply would be that some are and some are not. Consider, for example, different localities experimenting with the minimum wage rate, some setting higher and some lower rates. The rate of the minimum wage could certainly affect persons’ lives in meaningful ways, yet it does not seem likely that changes in it will lead persons to develop different perspectives about the world. Now consider an experiment in living in which a community decides to live off the grid. Here it seems reasonable to expect that the experiment will be transformative for participants and will meaningfully alter their perspectives about the world.

What accounts for the difference in transformative potential between the two experiments? A natural answer looks at the degree of social change the experiment involves. Of use here is a distinction Gregory Robson (2020: 81-88) draws between ‘moderate’ and ‘radical’

⁸ A classic example, referred to by Paul (p. 15), is Mary seeing color for the first time, see Jackson (1986).

experiments. The distinction, he explains, can be cashed out as either a distinction-in-kind or a distinction-in-degree (p. 82). Experiments can be classified as radical or moderate by virtue of the *kind of rule* they change, thus capturing the notion of a distinction-in-kind. Alternatively, experiments can be classified as radical or moderate by virtue of the *number of rules* they change, thus capturing the notion of a distinction-in-degree.

Using Robson's framework, we could categorize the first experiment as moderate and the second as radical. The conclusion would be that, as a general matter, the transformative potential of radical experiments is greater than that of moderate ones. I will revisit the import of Robson's distinction in the section on institutional implications. Before proceeding to review work on the benefits of diversity, I want to flesh out the mechanism through which political experiments transform persons' perspectives.

The Mechanism. At its core, a person's cognitive output is determined by two factors: (i) their cognitive production *function*, i.e., their cognitive processing; and (ii) the *arguments* that enter into said function, i.e., perceptions, ideas, and testimony from others. For example, a person whose function includes the operation of addition and is given the perception of two apples on one side of the room and two apples on the other side will think (or, put otherwise, output the thought) that there are four apples in the room.

This brief analysis is helpful in revealing that the claim being defended is made up of two distinct causal claims. The first is that there is a causal relation between sociopolitical environment and *cognitive processing*. The second is that there is a causal relation between sociopolitical environment and *ideational inputs*. In other words, I am first claiming that the way in which persons *process* information is shaped by their social and political environment. . In

addition, I claim, the information persons *encounter* or are receptive to is related to their political environment.

In a paper about the implications of cognitive diversity to the status of analytical epistemology, Stephen Stich (1988) identifies three possible ways in which persons' cognitive processes may be related to their environment. One possibility is that cognitive processes are like languages: humans have an innate capacity to acquire them, but what set of cognitive processes a particular individual ends up acquiring depends on the environment in which they are situated. A second possibility is that human cognitive processes are like digestion; a set of processes that function in mostly identical fashion independently of an individual's environment. A third and final possibility is some mixture of the two former ones. This would mean that some of our cognitive processes are invariant across different human environments while others are culturally dependent. Stich suggests that while the evidence bearing on this question is hardly conclusive, the third possibility seems the most likely given currently available evidence (pp. 392-93).

Stich's taxonomy and tentative conclusion supports the link drawn between sociopolitical environment and cognitive processing. This conclusion is further supported by reflection on the significance of cognitive heuristics and biases in our modes of reasoning. Behavioral and cognitive theorists have, in recent decades, documented a long list of such items.⁹ Closely related to these biases is the much-studied phenomenon of motivated reasoning, which posits a relation of causal influence between a person's preferences and her beliefs.¹⁰ According to this

⁹ The contemporary originators of this line of research are Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. For a classic statement of their core insights see Tversky and Kahneman (1974). For a well-known application to microeconomics see Kahneman and Tversky (1979).

¹⁰ Modeling this relation is no straightforward matter. As Epley and Gilovich (2016) point out, "people don't *simply* believe what they want to believe. The psychological mechanisms that produce motivated beliefs are much more complicated than that." (p. 133, emphasis in the original). Rather, they "*reason* their way to conclusions they favor, with their preferences influencing the way evidence is gathered, arguments are processed, and memories of past experience are recalled." (ibid. emphasis in the original).

hypothesis, we can expect changes in a person's utility function to subsequently produce changes in her ways of obtaining and processing information.

Of particular relevance to the issue of theorizing about justice in different political contexts is the so-called "just world hypothesis". First proposed and studied by Melvin Lerner (Lerner and Simmons 1966; Lerner 1980), the hypothesis holds that people tend to morally rationalize the reality they observe, in the sense that they attribute moral desert to situations and outcomes they encounter. The upshot of this tendency/bias is that changes in people's sociopolitical environment can lead to changes in their moral perception/reasoning, serving as one example of the political environment's effect on cognitive processing.

The familiarity bias is relevant to the second claim about a causal relation between political environment and ideational inputs. The familiarity hypothesis serves as an explanation for the widespread phenomenon of localized investment portfolios. (Huberman 2001). According to this line of explanation, individuals tend to allocate their funds to assets with which they are more familiar or about which they are more knowledgeable, even when evidence confirms that the alternative less familiar investments have equal or greater risk adjusted returns.¹¹ The upshot of noting this bias to our discussion is that individuals will tend to invest their cognitive resources in better understanding ideas prevalent in *their* social environment, even when alternative ideas prevalent elsewhere offer greater epistemic returns, thus creating a link between sociopolitical context and epistemic inquiry.¹²

¹¹ For the cognitive foundations of this line of explanation see Heath and Tversky 1991.

¹² In the case of investments, the downside of the familiarity bias is lack of diversification which results in lower risk adjusted returns. In the social epistemic case, the downside is also a lack of diversification in the ideas examined by members of the community. Here the issue is not one of reducing risk so much as avoiding decreasing marginal returns from overly trodden paths of epistemic inquiry. For example, political theorists and philosophers working in the US (myself included) are likely to have read more about democratic theory and US politics even when they might gain more valuable insights by diversifying their cognitive portfolio.

It is important to point out that increased interest in some phenomenon due to local circumstances need not be a manifestation of epistemic biases. Indeed, it is epistemically rational for a community to spend more of its cognitive resources on the problems and questions that it faces. For example, people who live in social environments segregated by race might expend cognitive effort to understand the causes and effects of such segregation and the possible interventions that might reduce it.

The example of segregation can also point to less direct effects a social environment can have on trajectories of intellectual inquiry. This indirect effect is exemplified by Thomas Schelling's famous checkerboard model which shows how segregation could emerge on the basis of relatively modest preferences (Schelling 1971). Schelling's abstract model opens the door more generally to an intellectual exploration of 'tipping point' models and to the possibility that such models may shed light on a wide variety of social phenomena. At an even higher level of abstraction, it provides an intriguing example of the Hayekian idea of spontaneous social order that arises from human action rather than planning or design (Boettke 1990).

The preceding discussion noted several ways in which work in psychology and behavioral economics can help to shed light on the relation between social environment and cognitive production. Expanding and elaborating on this line of inquiry, Karla Hoff and Joseph Stiglitz (2016) draw on work in sociology and anthropology to enrich this account and argue that "the social context not only primes individuals... it shapes them—how they think and what they want... In a sense, prolonged (and sometimes even brief) exposure to a given social context shapes *who people are*." (p. 26, emphasis in the original). There are, then, many ways to see and think about the relation between sociopolitical environment and cognitive production.

5. Experimentation and Diversity

The previous section substantiated the claim that political experiments have the potential to transform persons' cognitive perspectives. The aim of this section is to explain the social epistemic significance of this transformative dimension. More specifically, I highlight the fact that society can utilize transformative political experimentation as an endogenous mechanism for increasing its level of perspectival diversity.

There is now a substantial body of scholarly work, both theoretical and empirical, pointing to the social epistemic benefits of diversity. Before we review some of these, it is important to clarify what the term 'diversity' denotes in the context of the philosophical discussion. The relevant parameter by which diversity is measured in the philosophical context is the degree of heterogeneity in cognitive perspectives persons use to understand the world. In formal terms, a perspective can be defined as a cognitive function mapping from external objects to an internal language (Page 2008: 31). Slightly less formally, a perspective can be described as the cognitive framework persons use to categorize objects in the world into different types of objects. A person's perspective can thus be thought of as the ontological picture or map they use to navigate the world (Muldoon 2016: 30). *Perspectival* diversity is correlated with *demographic* heterogeneity. Thus, when theorists advocate for increasing and utilizing demographic diversity, they rely on the above well-established correlation.

The above description of perspectival diversity relates directly to my discussion in the previous section about the connection between social environment and cognitive production. It is clear that, to the extent that a political experiment qualifies as a transformative experience, the transformation it involves can be aptly characterized as a transformation in perspective, understood in the above sense of the term.

Turning to the social epistemic benefits of diversity. The work of Scott Page (2008, 2010, 2017) illustrates, primarily through formal models, how cognitive diversity can assist teams attempting to solve complex problems. As Muldoon (2018, 809) points out, the basic mechanism is quite intuitive: it is better to have additional persons who think about the problem differently than redundant persons performing similar or identical cognitive operations to solve the problem.

Importantly, the comparative advantage of diverse teams can remain even when the average competence of persons populating a diverse team is lower than that of those populating a more homogenous team. This insight is captured by Lu Hong and Scott Page's (2004) "diversity trumps ability" theorem. Muldoon (2018, 810) usefully illustrates the same point by relating the social epistemic benefit of diversity to the economic benefits of free trade generated by virtue of traders' comparative advantage as classically modeled by David Ricardo.

Complementing these theoretical results are a variety of empirical findings indicating the epistemic benefits of diversity. Muldoon (2018, 809-10) summarizes a list of such findings which include correlations between demographic diversity and success in business (higher revenues, greater profits, more innovation) as well as in public goals (more accurate jury verdicts, higher quality Wikipedia articles). He concludes the survey by noting that "in general, we find a consistent bump in both real-world and lab performance when groups are more diverse" (ibid., 810).

Interestingly enough, both those who emphasize the epistemic benefits of diversity, as well as those who highlight some of its costs, often take the presence of such diversity to be either exogenous to the model or to be a consequence of immigration policy and/or demographic trends. Muldoon, for example, describes his book as one that "starts with the goal of demonstrating that diversity is not only something that we are stuck with as *an empirical fact*,

but something we should celebrate and encourage” (p. 15, my emphasis). Similarly, both Rawls (1993) and Gaus (2011) consider diversity to be a crucial background fact about society.

Likewise, Hun Chung and Brian Kogelmann (2018) offer a social-choice theoretic account of public reason where perspectival diversity is modeled as an exogenous fact about the agents populating the model.

Proponents of diversity do not offer an endogenous mechanism for increasing or decreasing the level of perspectival diversity in society. If, however, experiments in living can transform persons’ perspectives about the world, as I suggested they indeed can, it follows that a society’s level of diversity partly depends on the degree to which it accommodates or incentivizes experimentation.¹³

Given the transformative potential of experimentation and the epistemic benefits of perspectival diversity, we can now see an epistemic argument for structuring society in ways that produce transformative experiments. Importantly, this argument can proceed independently of questions concerning the desirable rate of immigration. Equally importantly, the argument for experimentation can proceed independently of questions concerning the quality of the observational data that experiments produce. That being said, these and other considerations must be attended to when it comes to the question of institutional implementation and the tradeoffs involved therein. These issues will be discussed in the section that follows.

Before I turn to questions of institutional design, I want to highlight the importance of perspectival diversity holds in the context of theorizing in political philosophy. Indeed, Muldoon’s aforementioned work might be encapsulated as the attempt to incorporate perspectival diversity into social contract theory. In this, Muldoon’s work serves as a leading

¹³ Muldoon (2015/2016, ch.2) relates Millian experimentation to perspectival diversity but does not distinguish clearly between the observational and transformative dimensions of experimentation.

exemplar of what Gerald Gaus (2018) calls “New Diversity Theory”. A common theme running through the work of Gaus, Muldoon, and others is that diversity can be fruitfully viewed as a resource society can draw upon to make progress, as opposed to an impediment that needs to be dealt with through toleration.

In *The Tyranny of the Ideal* (2016), Gaus presents a framework for thinking through questions in what might be called meta political philosophy—the study of philosophical methodology in normative social theorizing. Gaus, building on previous work by Amartya Sen (2009), defends non-ideal theory by pointing to deep internal problems in the idea of utopian political theorizing. Setting aside the substance of Gaus’s argument, his overall framework can help to shed light on the epistemic significance of perspectival diversity to political philosophy.

The goal of the political philosopher, as conceptualized by Sen and Gaus, can be described as an exploration of the landscape of possible social realities. Because the philosopher is interested in the normative appraisal of these social worlds, justice being the primary value, we might refer to this task as an exploration of the *justice landscape*. Two core metrics are involved in this exploration. The first is what Gaus calls a ‘justice score’, a grade given to each social reality based on its conformity with the desiderata of justice. The second metric is that of distance between social worlds. The distance between world *a* and world *b* represents their degree of similarity in terms of sociopolitical features. It’s important to note that the distance between two worlds does not correlate fully with their justice scores. Proximate worlds may have substantially different justice scores, and distant worlds may have comparable justice scores.¹⁴ The product of the philosophical exploration of the justice landscape can be represented as a

¹⁴ In other words, the justice landscape is a moderately rugged one.

two-dimensional graph, where distance is represented along the x axis and justice score along the y axis.

Accurately mapping the justice landscape involves two core intellectual activities. The first is to *imagine* possible social realities. The second is to *evaluate* each reality, possible and actual, based on its normatively relevant features. Let us now consider the relation between perspectival diversity and the two tasks of political philosophy.

Start with the imaginative task of thinking of ways we could organize our social and political institutions. One reason our imagination may be limited is that we have yet to observe various possible configurations of social and political life. The observational dimension of experimentation can help us make progress on that front. Another reason our imagination may be limited is that our perspectives are too homogenous. Different perspectives make salient different aspects of our social and political fabric, in turn bringing into view different possibilities for how we might modify current arrangements. Perspectival diversity can thus expand the imaginative capacity of political theorists.

Consider next the evaluative task of assigning justice scores to possible (and actual) social realities based on their normatively significant features. Here too, the observational dimension of experiments can help us form more reliable judgments about the dynamics of social rules and outcomes. Importantly, however, to better evaluate social realities, we need to look at them from multiple perspectives. As Muldoon (2016, 39-43) points out, there is no neutral perspective or a “view from nowhere” through which social realities can be normatively assessed. Evaluating realities through a narrow perspective, whatever perspective it happens to be, will, by necessity, fail to attend to normatively significant features of that reality. The goal, to use Muldoon’s terminology, is to adopt a “view from everywhere” (ibid., 45-6) through which to

evaluate social realities. Perspectival diversity is therefore essential for the core philosophical task of evaluating social and political realities.

6. Institutional Implications

The preceding discussion highlighted two important distinctions. The first is between two epistemic dimensions of experimentation: observational and transformative. The second distinction, introduced by Robson, is between two kinds of experiments: moderate and radical. The purpose of this section is to explore the intersection of these two distinctions and questions of institutional design. In particular, I wish to examine how the preceding discussion can inform our choice between different forms of polycentric order.

The first point of the analysis requires distinguishing between two core ways of interpreting the idea of political experimentation in institutional terms. The first, what might be called *interframework* experimentation, consists of a society altering its overall political framework, for example by meaningfully changing its system of constitutional order. The second, what might be called *intraframework* experimentation, consists of a society allowing or incentivizing localities and groups in society to alter their internal rules within the overall societal framework/constitutional order.

The observational dimension of political experimentation could be pursued in either of the above senses of experimentation. For example, a national government could institute a new minimum wage rate and then compare metrics of interest (e.g., poverty, unemployment, mean household income, etc.) across time, i.e., before and after changes to the minimum wage. Alternatively, a federal order could allow or incentivize localities to set different minimum wage rates and then compare the aforementioned metrics across localities. Both types of

experimentation aim to net observational gains, the first through interframework experimentation, the second through intraframework experimentation.

Unlike the observational dimension, the transformative dimension of experimentation can only be benefited from through intraframework political experimentation. The reason for this has to do with the social epistemic purpose of transformative experimentation, namely increasing the overall level of perspectival diversity across society. Interframework experimentation could transform persons' perspectives but has no clear prospects of increasing the *overall level* of perspectival diversity. The idea of transformative experimentation relates directly, therefore, to the idea of political decentralization or *polycentricity*.

Notwithstanding the above subtleties, proponents of political experimentation typically conceive of the idea in intraframework terms and thus argue in favor of polycentric modes of organization. The concept of polycentricity can be defined as a social system with many partially autonomous decision centers competing and cooperating across overlapping jurisdictions and bounded by a common set of overarching rules (Ostrom et al. 1961, Aligica and Tarko 2013). The claim that polycentricity is epistemically valuable, however, is insufficiently precise, given the distinctions emphasized in this paper. More specifically, different forms of polycentricity can be expected to produce a different ratio of moderate to radical experimentation, in turn netting different kinds of epistemic gain.

In line with the above claim, we need to distinguish between two ways a polycentric order could be structured. The first form of polycentricity, what I call *correlated polycentricity*, aims to facilitate experimentation within relatively rigid (and thus tightly correlated) bounds. For example, the federal government may allow or incentivize localities to experiment with the production and/or provision of a particular good or service (e.g., public housing). The second

form of polycentricity, what I call *uncorrelated polycentricity*, aims to produce significantly divergent (thus uncorrelated) experiments. For example, the federal government may permit or incentivize localities to adopt different internal constitutions and methods of public goods production and provision.

The upshot of the distinction between correlated and uncorrelated polycentricity is its relation to the observational-transformative tradeoff. More correlated forms of polycentricity have better prospects of producing observational data points bearing on the relation between social rules and outcomes, thus optimizing for the observational dimension of experimentation.¹⁵ Less correlated forms of polycentricity, meanwhile, have greater potential to orient the perspectives of individuals and groups in different directions, thus increasing overall perspectival diversity in society by optimizing for the transformative dimension of experimentation.

The present suggestion, then, is that polycentricity can be structured in at least two different ways, each optimizing for one of the two different dimensions of political experimentation. Several points are worth noting with regard to this general claim. To begin, note that there are important non-epistemic considerations that should guide our choice of institutions. There are longstanding *moral* debates between libertarians who favor more voluntarist, laissez-faire forms of polycentricity and liberal egalitarians who defend more controlled forms of polycentricity where some degree of central planning or redistribution is used as a tool to equalize between persons.

Similarly, one can imagine prudential or economic arguments in favor of either of the above-described forms of polycentricity. For instance, some may argue that introducing more

¹⁵ Note that the federal government's role in incentivizing and guiding observationally motivated experimentation may be quite substantial. For arguments to that effect see Galle and Leahy (2009) and Wiseman and Owen (2018). For further public choice related complications see Rose-Ackerman (1980) and Livermore (2017).

standardization into the polycentric order. i.e., more correlated polycentricity, is desirable on grounds of reducing transaction costs. Others may argue that such standardization leads to economic inefficiency because it fails to adjust public production and provision based on local knowledge and preferences (Ostrom et al. 1961), or because it reduces the incentives for public entrepreneurship and innovation (Kogelmann 2018).

The issue of political risk management is also an important one in terms of incentivizing or allowing radical experimentation. One argument against uncorrelated polycentricity is that, by expanding the scope and diversity of experimentation, it allows for radical experiments that may lead to catastrophic results. There is no shortage of historical examples of social experiments, large and small, that, while potentially transformative to participants, led to communal or societal ruin. Historical reflection and general prudence might thus point toward more moderate experimentation and more correlated forms of polycentricity.

A final, and crucial point to be mindful of is that the distinction between correlated and uncorrelated polycentricity should not be understood to denote a binary societal choice. Rather, society can choose between a whole range of polycentric configurations more or less correlated (Aligica 2014: 61-64). Putting this and the previous considerations together, it seems reasonable to say that there are benefits and costs to designing the polycentric arrangement in more or less correlated ways.

One way of interpreting the liberal project is to see it as an attempt to strike a sensible balance between these different considerations or costs and benefits. For example, we can say that experiments are to be incentivized and accommodated so long as they do not infringe on or violate a set of basic rights. Thus, radical experiments which involve suspending and/or violating the rights of individuals (fascism/communism) fall outside the constraints of a *liberal* polycentric

order. On the other hand, radical experiments which do not involve such violations, e.g., appointing political representatives by lot as opposed to election (Guerrero 2014), could be permitted within a liberal polycentric order.

7. Conclusion

At the foundations of a liberal order are two attractive ideas. The first is that if we give persons greater freedom to experiment with different ways of living together, we will learn important lessons about things we care about. The second is that if we organize our associations to be more diverse, we will do better at solving problems and challenges we seek to address. A central aim of this paper has been to clarify the relation between these two ideas. I have suggested that structuring society to produce certain kinds of experiments can function as an endogenous mechanism for generating more perspectival diversity.

This mechanism for generating perspectival diversity relies on the transformative dimension of experimentation which can best be capitalized on through more radical experiments. Experiments can also be epistemically beneficial, however, in observational terms, by illuminating the relation between social rules and social outcomes. My analysis of these two epistemic dimensions and their potential institutional implications has led me to a relatively inconclusive conclusion. At the heart of liberalism and its polycentric institutional realizations are tradeoffs, both epistemic and non-epistemic, that are difficult to adjudicate between. The task for liberal theorists is to keep in mind this complex normative picture and to continue to grapple with the many challenges it poses.

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