

## Author's Reply: Governed by Ignorance

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I am delighted for the opportunity to respond to the engaging and constructive comments of Professors Skoble and Nabors, and Mr. Sandefur, concerning my book, *F. A. Hayek and the Epistemology of Politics: The Curious Task of Economics*.<sup>1</sup> As someone who works on relatively obscure and extremely nerdy subjects, it is always an honor – and often a surprise – when anyone takes the time to read and earnestly reflect upon my work. I thank the symposium participants for their generous contributions and my friend, Dr. Shawn E. Klein, editor of *Reason Papers*, for organizing the symposium. Before replying to my critics, it will be helpful for readers who have not yet read the book to recapitulate the main arguments.

### 1. Recapitulation

*F. A. Hayek and the Epistemology of Politics* is primarily intended as a contribution to the philosophy and methodology of the Austrian School of economics (pp. 1-2). However, as the symposium participants are all quick to note, several of the book's central

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Scheall, *F. A. Hayek and the Epistemology of Politics: The Curious Task of Economics* (Abingdon, UK and New York: Routledge, 2020). All references to the book in this symposium are by page numbers in parentheses.

arguments, especially those advanced in the first chapter, are of potential significance far beyond Austrian economics. The arguments of the first chapter present an important *methodological* challenge to multiple fields of political inquiry, to traditional political philosophy and theory, and to modern political science, as well as a significant *practical* problem for anyone concerned with the effectiveness of political action. Professional political thinkers and laypersons alike conceive the basic political problem to concern the motivations, reasons, incentives, etc., of policymakers. On this way of thinking, the fundamental problem to be solved, analytically, by the disciplines of political inquiry, and, practically, in political life, is *how to ensure that policymakers are adequately motivated to pursue policy goals either that are in constituents' interests or that constituents' want pursued*. I do not deny the significance of this problem or the value of the proposed solutions, whether analytical or practical-constitutional, that have been offered in the long course of the history of politics and political thought. The book does not suggest that we should scrap thousands of years of political inquiry and start all over again.

However, it does argue that political inquiry has started in the wrong place, that there is a better starting point, which promises to enrich political analysis. There is a more fundamental political problem than that of policymakers' incentives that has too long been ignored. If, as I argue in the first chapter, epistemic considerations play the fundamental role in human decision-making – and, thus, in political decision-making – in particular, if the nature and extent of our *ignorance*, our *epistemic burden*, with respect to a course of action serves to determine whether and to what extent we are motivated to pursue it, then the problem of policymaker incentives is ancillary to the *problem of policymaker ignorance*. The book argues, moreover, that the degree to which policymaker ignorance is a problem determines the extent of the ancillary incentive problem. That is, in a world where policymakers know everything they need to know to realize goals associated with their constituents' policy interests or policy demands, there is less scope for selfish, corrupt, or otherwise non-constituent-minded, policy pursuits. On the other hand, where policymakers are ignorant, in whole or in part, of the knowledge required to realize their constituents' interests or demands, it is comparatively easy – the policymaker faces a relatively greater incentive – to *not* be constituent-

minded. To see this, just consider an extreme case in which policymakers are entirely ignorant of the knowledge required to satisfy their constituents, where policymakers know nothing about constituents' policy interests and demands, and nothing about how to realize policy goals associated with these demands. Obviously, given this ignorance, these constituent-minded goals will be realized only if luck, fortune, or other unintended, *spontaneous*, forces intervene to compensate for the goal-defeating effects of policymaker ignorance. More to the point, if policymakers *recognize* their ignorance, if they see that trying to satisfy their constituents is likely to end in failure, unless forces beyond their ken and control intervene, then they are unlikely to even attempt to satisfy their constituents; policymakers ignorant of how to realize goals that their constituents want (or need) are relatively more likely to pursue other, non-constituent-minded goals. In particular, if policymakers recognize that earnest pursuit of policy objectives in their constituents' interests is likely to end in failure and that they can accrue similar benefits by merely *pretending*, by simply paying lip service, to the pursuit of goals in their constituents' interests, they are relatively more likely to engage in political theater than to earnestly pursue constituent-minded goals. In short, the nature and extent of their ignorance with respect to constituent-mindedness serves to determine the nature and extent of – what kind and how much – constituent-mindedness we get from policymakers. Ignorance constrains and binds the human reasoning process within more or less narrow borders. Ignorance always comes *first* and contributes to determining the incentives, motivations, etc., that ultimately determine a decision.

It is important to recognize that this thesis of the *logical priority of the epistemic* in human (and, therefore, in political) decision-making, though novel and seemingly radical, is becoming better established in the philosophical and psychological literatures. Arguments for the thesis and analysis of its implications have appeared in *Cosmos + Taxis: Studies in Emergent Order and Organization, Medicine, Health Care, and Philosophy*, *American Journal of Bioethics*, and *Episteme*.<sup>2</sup> I

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<sup>2</sup> See, respectively, Scott Scheall, "Ignorance and the Incentive Structure confronting Policymakers" *Cosmos + Taxis: Studies in Emergent Order and Organization*, 7, no. 1-2 (2019), pp. 39-51; Parker Crutchfield and Scott Scheall, "Epistemic Burdens and the Incentives of Surrogate Decision-makers" *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, 22 (2019), pp. 613-621; Parker

mention this not to appeal to my own authority or to the authority of these journals, but to suggest that the logical priority of the epistemic cannot simply be wished away because one does not like its implications.<sup>3</sup> Arguments for the thesis must be criticized on their own grounds. I offer two such arguments in the first chapter of the book for the logical priority of the epistemic.<sup>4</sup>

The first argument relies on introspection. Reflection on our own decision processes reveals that the options that we consciously consider in any given decision context seem to have been (pre-consciously) sorted for the nature and extent of our ignorance. Somehow, by some mechanism, courses of action with respect to which we are ignorant, do not appear to us in consciousness as options worth pursuing.

The toy example I like to use here asks the reader to imagine a scenario in which they must travel some considerable distance across country and the various means they might employ to reach their destination. Many potential courses of action to realize this goal – e.g., air, rail, automobile, or pedestrian travel – might consciously appear to the reader as options to evaluate in light of relevant normative considerations, such as the comparative ethical properties, prudence, and

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Crutchfield and Scott Scheall, “Epistemic Burdens, Moral Intimacy, and Surrogate Decision Making” *American Journal of Bioethics*, 20, no 2, (2020), pp. 59-61; Scott Scheall and Parker Crutchfield. “The Priority of the Epistemic.” *Episteme*, Issue TBD, Published online 18 February 2020: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/episteme/article/priority-of-the-epistemic/C84747A8C333A1019FB573D3E6EEDCC6>.

<sup>3</sup> Apropos of the objections of my critics, I explicitly define policymaking in the book to encompass the crafting of a political constitution (p. 15). Thus, as I conceive it, policymaking includes the choice of the “fundamental laws of political regimes [that] address highest ends” (Nabors, “Godly versus Godlike Government,” *Reason Papers*, 42, no. 2 (2020), p. 36). That the choice of “higher ends” is encompassed in the analysis is also implied by the argument for the full generality of the logical priority of the epistemic in human decision-making. As much as my critics might wish them to be, such choices are not exempt from the logical priority of the epistemic.

<sup>4</sup> Also see Scott Scheall and Parker Crutchfield. “The Priority of the Epistemic.” *Episteme*, Issue TBD, Published online 18 February 2020: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/episteme/article/priority-of-the-epistemic/C84747A8C333A1019FB573D3E6EEDCC6>.

pecuniary cost of the various options. But, other ways that one might try to travel to a destination will not reach this level of conscious consideration. For example, I predict that flying like a bird without mechanical assistance will not consciously appear to the reader as an option, because the reader knows (if only un- or sub-consciously) that they are ignorant how to fly like a bird without mechanical assistance. Ignorance has already done its work, on an un- or sub-conscious level, to prevent this course of action from consciously appearing to the reader as an option. Of course, it is very good for the reader and, ultimately, for the reader's species, that the constraining and binding function of ignorance on human decision-making apparently serves to prevent the conscious consideration of such sure-to-be-disastrous courses of action. If ignorance did not constrain our options, there would be more people trying to fly like birds and falling flat, literally.

To counter this argument, one must provide an argument that personal decision-making does not in fact proceed in this fashion, i.e., from un- or sub-conscious evaluation of knowledge, and ignorance, to conscious consideration of remaining options in light of relevant (moral/ethical, prudential, pecuniary) normative criteria. One needs to show, in other words, that individuals regularly consciously evaluate courses of action about which they know themselves to be ignorant, that it is not un- or sub-conscious recognition of their relevant ignorance that keeps people from the consequences of trying to fly like birds, but conscious evaluation of this course of action.

The second argument for the logical priority of the epistemic considers the relationship between our obligations and our ability to bring about states of affairs associated with these obligations. Most people accept that some relationship obtains between the things we *ought* to do and the things we *can* do. As ever, there is disagreement among philosophers about the exact nature and logical strength of this relationship. My second argument for the logical priority of the epistemic does not hinge on whether *implication* rather some other logical relation properly binds ought and can. My argument is that, in order for it to be practically useful, the word "can" in the correct principle, whatever it is, must mean *deliberately can*. Every other candidate meaning for "can" makes the resulting principle practically useless, i.e., makes it such that the principle could never be put to

practical use to determine one's potential obligations and to determine, conversely, those actions that one could never be obligated to perform. On the assumption that the correct principle is practically useful – and why would we worry about such principles if the correct principle were not practically useful? – every other meaning of “can” makes the principle inoperable. Thus, by reductio, whatever the correct principle, the word “can” must mean *deliberately can*. But, to say that one “deliberately can” do something is just to say that the person can perform the action on the basis of their own knowledge and learning capacity, that the action is entirely within their ken and under their control, that the person *knows enough to* perform the action (successfully) without need for the intervention of luck, fortune, or any other spontaneous forces. In short, if *ought implies* (or whatever) *can*, then *ought implies* (or whatever) *knows enough to*. The epistemic, the “can” or, more exactly, the “knows enough to,” is logically prior to the (non-epistemic) normative, the “ought.”

To counter this argument, it is necessary to show that there is another candidate meaning of “can” that renders such principles practically useful. However, as I argue in the first chapter of the book, the most obvious competing interpretations of “can” make such principles useless.

The upshot of these two arguments is that, when human beings make decisions for themselves, we always reason from what is known to what potentially ought to be done and never from (non-epistemic) normative considerations alone. Again, this seems an important part of any explanation of why we survive in the world to the extent that we do: we rarely, if ever, saddle ourselves with impossible obligations, with things we purportedly ought to do, but that are bound to fail without spontaneous assistance, because we have not first considered our epistemic burdens. Reflecting on the relative epistemic burdens of competing courses of action, if only unconsciously, is a means of avoiding personal disaster.<sup>5</sup> The pre-conscious understanding that

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<sup>5</sup> I hesitate to mention this here, as it might ultimately prove premature, but several colleagues and I are in the process of experimentally testing the thesis of the priority of the epistemic to see if we can induce different kinds of moral judgments by manipulating what subjects know about relevant circumstances. Suffice it to say that our results so far do not falsify the thesis.

airplane travel is to be consciously considered, but that bird-like travel is not, likely saves lives.

The only exception to this rule that reasoning proceeds from what is known to what potentially ought to be done occurs in cases of *surrogate* decision-making, when some persons decide on behalf and ostensibly in the interests, of some other persons. Surrogate decision-makers are purportedly obligated either to promote the interests of the surrogated or, what is sometimes the same thing, to decide as the surrogated person would decide, if they could decide for themselves. But, notice that this purported obligation assumes a proposition that may well be false, namely, that the surrogate *knows* the interests of the surrogated and *knows how* to promote them, or, alternatively, that the surrogate *knows* how the surrogated would decide, if they could decide for themselves. In effect, the purported obligation of surrogate decision-makers assumes that surrogates possess or can learn the same knowledge as the persons on whose behalf they decide, an assumption rarely, if ever, satisfied. Put another way, surrogate decision-makers cannot always, deliberately or otherwise, satisfy their purported obligations. If the foregoing argument about the meaning of “can” in principles like *ought implies* (or whatever) *can* is sound, then surrogates who are ignorant in the relevant ways are not obligated to promote the interests of the surrogated or to decide as the surrogated person would decide. We attribute obligations to surrogate decision-makers that they cannot always satisfy. When satisfaction is beyond the surrogate’s ken, the purported obligation evaporates.

More to the point, unlike in cases of personal decision-making, in surrogate cases, there is no mechanism for avoiding disaster. Surrogate decision-makers are sometimes “obligated” to do things they cannot do. If they try to realize their so-called “obligations” despite their ignorance, they are likely to fail and the interests of those surrogated are unlikely to be respected, unless, of course, spontaneous forces intervene to compensate for the consequences of the surrogate’s ignorance.

Policymakers are surrogate decision-makers. They decide on behalf and ostensibly in the interests of their constituents. There is no mechanism that ensures they possess the knowledge required to do so. There is no mechanism that helps avoid ignorance-induced disaster in political decision-making. Policymakers are purportedly obligated to do

things that, sometimes, they cannot do. If they try to realize this non-obligation, they are likely to fail and the interests of their constituents will be respected only if spontaneous forces intervene to compensate the effects of their ignorance.

My suggestion is that, if we want to avoid political disaster (and I assume we do), we should reason in politics as we do in our personal lives, from what is known to what (potentially) ought to be done, rather than, as we currently reason in all cases of surrogate, including political, decision-making, from “ought” considerations alone. The former is a method for avoiding disaster, the latter an invitation to it. In order to avoid political disaster, we should first consider what policymakers can and cannot know, and only then consider what they ought to do. We should stop assigning obligations to policymakers without considering the adequacy – or otherwise – of their epistemic capacities.

At the end of the first chapter, I offer a “taxonomy” of ignorant policymakers and of the consequences of different kinds of policymaker ignorance (pp. 27-29). There are four species of policymaker. Those who know that they are ignorant with respect to some policy objective, as above, face an incentive to pursue *other objectives*, other things equal. Policymakers who are ignorant of their knowledge regarding some goal, because they also believe, albeit mistakenly, that pursuing the goal will end in failure, likewise confront an incentive, *ceteris paribus*, to pursue other goals. Policymakers who are ignorant of their ignorance with respect to some policy goal are potentially quite dangerous: they face an incentive to pursue goals that they are too ignorant to achieve, goals that are likely to fail because of their ignorance, the likely failure of which they fail to appreciate because they are ignorant of their ignorance. Hayek diagnosed such ignorant-of-their-ignorance policymakers as suffering from a “pretence of knowledge.”<sup>6</sup> It is only those policymakers who know that their knowledge is sufficient with respect to some policy goal – the “wise captains of the ship of state” – whose incentives cannot be distorted by ignorance (because, *ex hypothesi*, they are not ignorant).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> F. A. Hayek, “The Pretence of Knowledge” in B. J. Caldwell (ed.), *The Collected Works of F. A. Hayek, Volume XV, The Market and Other Orders* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1975] 2014, pp. 362-372.

<sup>7</sup> Plato’s wise captain or “true pilot of the ship of state” is discussed in Book VI



The arguments of the subsequent five chapters of the book are, as compared to those of the first chapter, relatively easily recapitulated:

In the second chapter, I argue that the logical priority of the epistemic is implicit in the Austrians' arguments against socialist central planning and Keynesian-style demand management. If one extends the Austrians' reasoning to other, non-economic, policymaking contexts, one eventually arrives at the problem of policymaker ignorance. Indeed, if one extends this same reasoning to contexts other than the political, one eventually arrives at a fully general *problem of ignorance* that is relevant in all decision contexts, within and outside politics.

The generality of ignorance and its effects on decision-making, and on the success or failure of decisions taken, represents both an opening and a closing for Austrian economists. It is an opening, I argue in Chapter Three, in the sense that it is an opportunity to extend their political-epistemological approach to policy criticism to contexts other than the socialistic and Keynesian. It is a closing, however, in the sense that Austrians have not shown that the preference, seemingly universally shared among Austrian economists, for liberal democracy and for liberalization from the status quo is immune to the same kind of epistemic criticisms they level at socialists and Keynesians. Indeed, I argue that creating and sustaining liberal societies involves considerable epistemic burdens that Austrians have not shown to be surmountable by human – and, therefore, epistemically limited – policymakers.

In Chapter Four, I consider the specifically epistemological aspects of political epistemology. I argue that, in order to facilitate discussion and intersubjective agreement concerning policymaker knowledge, and ignorance, political epistemology must proceed as an empirical discipline. The knowledge possessed or lacked by policymakers must be conceived as open to empirical investigation, at least to a degree. Such agreement would be impossible *in principle* were political epistemology founded on rationalistic *a priori* axioms. I argue that Hayek's own theory of knowledge – which defines knowledge as the explicit and tacit assumptions of *plans of action* that can be

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of *The Republic*, not Book IV, as erroneously indicated in my text (p. 29). Plato, *The Republic*. Translated by G. M. A. Grube (Second Edition). Revised by C. D. C. Reeve. (Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 1992).

implemented successfully, without need for the intervention of spontaneous forces – fits the required bill.

In the fifth and sixth chapters, I draw various implications from the Hayekian canon relevant to the analysis and possible mitigation of the consequences of policymaker ignorance. In Chapter Five, I argue that the Hayekian theory of social order bears important implications for an “epistemic-mechanistic” method of analyzing and possibly mitigating the consequences of policymaker ignorance. We need mechanisms that convey to both policymakers and constituents the knowledge that members of each class require to successfully adapt their plans to relevant circumstances. I note that any so-called democratic government in which policymakers are ignorant either of constituents’ wants and needs, or of how to realize ends associated with these wants and needs, does not in fact respect the principle of *popular sovereignty* and is, therefore, at best, democratic in name and superficial appearance only. In Chapter Six, I describe another approach to the problem of policymaker ignorance that would aim to constitutionally debar policymakers from pursuing goals they were too ignorant to contribute to realizing. The constitutional approach would investigate policymakers’ knowledge and ignorance, try to determine what kinds of goals policymakers could help realize on the basis of their epistemic capacities, and then constitutionally prohibit political action with regard to goals that, because of their ignorance, policymakers could not help realize.

These two methods are not mutually exclusive and might be combined. That is, we might try to develop more effective mechanisms for communicating relevant knowledge between policymakers and constituents, while also seeking to restrict political action to domains with regard to which policymaker knowledge is adequate for a positive effect.

However, it must be emphasized how modest my expectations are for positive political-epistemological analysis. Empiricism makes political epistemology possible, but, as every empiricist knows, it is not a method of discovering *certainty*. I do not pretend to offer methods of analysis in the last two chapters of the book akin to a philosopher’s stone that will turn our base politics into golden utopia. The arguments of the second part of the book are mere suggestions for the subsequent

development of political epistemology. Indeed, I am explicit throughout the book that its main purpose is to analyze the many deleterious consequences of policymaker ignorance and to encourage further analysis, and new research, into its causes and effects. If it means that the problem of policymaker ignorance is finally recognized as the fundamental political problem, if it means that the problem of policymaker incentives is accordingly demoted to the ancillary status in political inquiry which is, logically, its due, the book will have succeeded in its primary mission.

## 2. Reply to Skoble

Of the three reviewers, Professor Skoble read the book most charitably and accurately. His extensions and elaborations of various arguments in the book improve it considerably. I will have occasion to refer to Skoble's essay many times as I continue to develop the research project.

There are only a few clarifying comments that I will make in response to Professor Skoble. First, although the book is perhaps most directly applicable to liberal democracy, the central arguments are relevant wherever policymakers act as surrogates, wherever they are expected to act on behalf of some other people, their constituents. This describes practically all governments, ancient and modern.<sup>8</sup> Even autocrats are *expected* to act in the interests of constituents, whether they ever do or not. Second, Professor Skoble is surely correct to note that what a constituent wants from policymakers may not track with what is in the constituent's (true) best interests, i.e., that what a person believes to be in their interest may not actually be in their interest, and, therefore, that policymakers are unlikely to know what is in their constituents' interests, since the latter do not know themselves. In the book, I wanted to avoid the question whether it is more important for policymakers to pursue their constituents' interests or their constituents' demands, inasmuch as these come apart, as nothing of substance for my argument required taking a stance on this vexed problem. There is no reason to

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<sup>8</sup> Another reviewer, Professor Nabors, is wrong to claim that the book is about the modern administrative state (Nabors, p. 33).

think that policymakers are generally more knowledgeable about constituents' policy demands than they are about constituents' interests (or *vice versa*), so nothing for political epistemology hinges on this difference. Whether you think policymakers should pursue their constituents' demands or their constituents' (true) interests, policymaker ignorance is likely to undermine the purported obligation.

### 3. Reply to Sandefur

According to Mr. Sandefur, the book encompasses a normative argument for spontaneous order, which he takes to be problematic on the grounds that there is no “qualitative” difference between spontaneous and constructed orders, a proposition he believes to have established in the secondary literature on Hayek.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, this proposition has never, to my knowledge, been denied by any serious Hayekian scholar. Now, surely, Hayek's ideas have been used and abused in many different ways. Indeed, in his later – and, it must be said, declining – years, Hayek himself was not as careful about the consistent use of his ideas as he was in his prime (see Footnote 2 in Sandefur's essay), a fact that I criticize extensively, if only implicitly, in the third chapter of the book. However, the consensus in modern Hayek studies is and, from what I can tell, has long been, that the difference between spontaneity and construction is a continuum, not a dichotomy, i.e., that every spontaneous order will encompass some deliberate actions and every constructed order some spontaneity.<sup>10</sup> No one thinks that the deliberately planned actions of

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<sup>9</sup> Timothy Sandefur, “Think Inside the Box” *Reason Papers*, 42, no. 2 (2020) p. 13; see also Timothy Sandefur, “Some Problems with Spontaneous Order” *The Independent Review* 14, no. 1 (2009), pp. 5-25.

<sup>10</sup> Hayek denies the “dichotomy” reading in favor of the “continuity” interpretation of spontaneous order in “Kinds of Rationalism.” Hayek's fellow Nobel Prize winner (and committed Hayekian) Vernon Smith similarly denies the dichotomy reading. Likewise, David Schmidtz (who I quote in support of the continuity interpretation on page 156, footnote 4, of the book), Roger Koppl and me are all committed to the continuity reading of spontaneous order. Indeed, I know no Hayekian who accepts the dichotomy interpretation. See, F. A. Hayek, “Kinds of Rationalism” in *The Collected Works of F. A. Hayek, Volume XV, The Market and Other Orders*, ed. B.J. Caldwell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1964] 2014), pp. 39-53. Vernon L. Smith, *Rationality in Economics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 2. David Schmidtz, “Friedrich Hayek” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of*

individual market participants are immaterial to the emergence of the invisible hand of market society. The market order is “spontaneous” in the sense that its emergence is not intended by anyone, not planned and imposed from the top down, though its emergence may – of course – involve a fair amount of intentional planning from the bottom up, as it were, among individual market participants. Conversely, some plan may be deliberately realized only if the planner has properly accounted for how others will spontaneously adapt to relevant circumstances. If, in addition to whatever other knowledge is required, the planner knows how people will spontaneously react and accounts for these reactions in their plan, then they can be said to have deliberately realized the outcome, regardless of how much spontaneity may have been required from other persons. Nothing about my argument requires spontaneous orders to be spontaneous *all the way down*, as it were, or, for that matter, requires that spontaneity play no role in the results of deliberate planning. If policymakers possess all of the knowledge required to bring about some outcome, including how others will spontaneously respond to circumstances – I am agnostic how often, if ever, policymakers satisfy this condition – then they will be able to deliberately realize the outcome. If not, then not, and the goal will be realized only if spontaneous forces not encompassed in their political plans intervene to compensate the consequences of policymakers’ ignorance.

Sandefur has no objection to the descriptive or explanatory use of the concept of spontaneity, but this is the only way that the concept is used in the book. *Contra* Sandefur, I have no “bias” in favor of spontaneous order.<sup>11</sup> I am not trying to justify a pro-spontaneity bias. The book is simply about pointing out and drawing out the implications of the problem of policymaker ignorance, and suggesting a few ways

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*Philosophy*, ed. E.N. Zalta, 2012 URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2012/entries/friedrich-hayek/>. Caryn Devins, Roger Koppl, Stuart Kauffman, and Teppo Felin, “Against Design” *Arizona State Law Journal*, 47 (3), 2015, pp. 609-681. Scott Scheall, “Lesser Degrees of Explanation: Some Implications of F. A. Hayek’s Methodology of Sciences of Complex Phenomena.” *Erasmus Journal for Philosophy and Economics*, 8 (1), 2015, pp. 42-60.

<sup>11</sup> Sandefur, p. 14.

that the problem might be analyzed and perhaps to some degree mitigated.

There is no normative defense of spontaneity to be found anywhere in the book. There are no “policy recommendations” in the book, which is entirely, and explicitly, about the methodology and history of political inquiry.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Chapter Three should be read as an attack on the exceedingly simplistic notion that, politically speaking, we “ought” to give free rein to spontaneity. I argue that, inasmuch as they are aimed at bringing about particular outcomes, both the policies of *doing nothing* and of *doing nothing but removing obstacles to the operation of spontaneous forces* bear epistemic burdens that may not be surmountable by epistemically-limited human policymakers. I am not, as Sandefur seems to think, advocating for either (or any) policy. I am drawing out the epistemic requirements of a successful do-nothing policy. If, as Sandefur argues, such requirements are rarely, if ever, satisfied, then such policies cannot deliberately realize their goals.<sup>13</sup> There is nothing here that confronts my argument, which, again, has nothing to do with promoting do-nothing policies. Of course, there are people in the Austrian community – perhaps not serious Austrian scholars, but some on the fringes of the Austrians’ big tent – who use Hayek’s ideas indelicately and who try to argue that the results to which spontaneity leads are necessarily “good” (in some sense). The present author cannot be convicted of this thought crime. I am well aware of the possibility of “negative” spontaneous orders. Indeed, I don’t know how to interpret Chapter Three if not as an appeal to modern Austrians to pay closer attention to this possibility.

Unfortunately, Sandefur chooses not to address the thesis of the logical priority of the epistemic on its own terms. Rather than providing grounds to doubt either my argument from introspection or my argument from the meaning of “can” in principles like *ought implies can*, Sandefur rests his case on the correct, but irrelevant, point that goals are inherently normative, as if I denied this.<sup>14</sup> The question is, what

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> Sandefur seems to think that the possibility of learning undermines my introspective argument. It does not. The introspective argument is explicitly framed in the book in terms of what actors “take themselves to be too ignorant

determines whether a course of action appears or does not appear in consciousness, given that some potential courses of action (flying like a bird) do not consciously appear to us as options to consider, while other courses of action (air, rail, automobile, or pedestrian travel) do appear in consciousness? My answer is that our knowledge and ignorance serve to determine whether a course of action is consciously evaluated against normative criteria. Sandefur has no answer. He declares victory on the grounds that political goals emerge without prior consideration of their comparative epistemic burdens, but fails to notice that this is exactly the problem with which I am most concerned. Regardless of whether goals are inherently normative, it is surely possible to have a public discussion about potential policy goals and the political knowledge that is, or is not, available to policymakers with regard to these goals, before crossing into the normative realm of assigning obligations to policymakers to pursue them. This is really all I am suggesting in arguing that, if we want to avoid political disaster, we should reason in politics as we do in our personal lives, from what we know to our potential obligations.

I admit that the methods of analysis suggested in the second part of the book will not lead to infallible knowledge of political knowledge and ignorance. This is not their purpose. Before we can perfect political-epistemological analysis (to the likely limited extent it is at all perfectible), we must start it. As already mentioned, I have no very lofty ambitions for this analysis, beyond learning more than we know now – basically nothing – about policymakers’ epistemic capacities, the limits these place on the effectiveness of deliberate political action, and the prospects for spontaneous forces beyond policymakers’ ken and control to compensate the consequences of their ignorance. I am not suggesting that we shut down or otherwise paralyze governments in lieu of such analysis. Political epistemology is not meant to “stand on its own.”<sup>15</sup> It is meant to clarify – not determine once and for all – what can and cannot be achieved through deliberate political action. Normative political inquiry loses none of its force. It just comes to play a subsidiary role.

#### 4. Reply to Nabors

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and too *incapable of learning* enough to achieve” (Scheall, p. 21; italics added).

<sup>15</sup> Sandefur, p. 25.

Professor Nabors builds his criticism on a distinction between the alleged “moderation” of ancient political thinkers and the supposed thoroughgoing “ambition” of their modern descendants, and places my project in the latter, apparently, unjustifiably hubristic, tradition.<sup>16</sup> This is a strange classification of a book the central argument of which is that the problem of policymaker ignorance is general across all political decision-making contexts and must severely restrict our political ambitions, if political disaster is to be avoided.<sup>17</sup> Whatever its other (surely many) sins, arrogantly advocating for ambitious policymaking is not among them. The most unfortunate aspect of his caustic interpretation of the book is that, in the perennial battle between hubris and humility in politics, Professor Nabors and I are in fact fighting in the same army for moderation against the forces of political arrogance and excessive ambition.

I take the question what policymakers can and cannot deliberately realize on the basis of their knowledge and learning capacities to be an empirical question. As implied by the title of his essay and his attack on my empiricism, Professor Nabors apparently believes good government to be deducible from some combination of reason and revelation. Moreover, although I am explicitly agnostic about the correct answer to the empirical question, pending further analysis, my pre-analytical assumption that these epistemic capacities and, thus, the goals achievable on their basis, are quite limited, is apparent throughout the book. Indeed, perhaps the first substantive statement in the book is that

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<sup>16</sup> Nabors, p. 30.

<sup>17</sup> As I argue in the book and have argued elsewhere:

We can have a government that is effective in the sense that it regularly meets policy objectives or we can have a government that is ambitious in the sense that it permits the pursuit of comparatively epistemically burdensome policy objectives, but we cannot have both. Until policymakers approach omniscience and omnipotence, governments of the latter kind will always be less effective – they will tend to achieve their objectives less regularly – than will governments of the former kind (p. 180).

Also see Scott Scheall, “Ignorance and the Incentive Structure confronting Policymakers” *Cosmos + Taxis: Studies in Emergent Order and Organization*, 7, no. 1-2 (2019), p. 44.



policymakers are mere human beings and that all human beings are more or less equally epistemically capable (p. *ix*). Yet, Professor Nabors seems to believe, though he offers no argument or evidence, that policymakers are epistemically special.<sup>18</sup> How else to explain his misplaced concern that the core of the book is an argument for perfected – “godlike” – technocracy? Such a thesis would be defensible, on my terms, only if supported by an argument that policymakers possess the knowledge necessary to positively contribute to the realization of utopia. No such argument appears in the book. It is a mystery how Professor Nabors infers an argument for technocracy from what does appear in the book.

Policymakers are neither omniscient nor omnipotent. They are no different in this respect than other cognitively-limited human beings. In the last chapter of the book, I argue that, though we will never make policymakers omniscient and omnipotent – which would be the only full-fledged *solution* to the problem of policymaker ignorance – through empirical inquiry into their knowledge and ignorance, we might make policymakers *functionally* omniscient and omnipotent, by limiting their range of political motion to goals with respect to which their knowledge and learning capacities are adequate to a positive contribution (pp. 158-159). In the absence of the sort of empirical inquiry into policymaker knowledge and ignorance for which I advocate throughout the book, I must remain essentially agnostic about the scale and scope of the goals

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<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Nabors’ assertion that the American Founders realized the kind of liberal order that liberals tend to praise obviously begs the question against me. The American political order such as it is (and always has been) is a consequence of the interaction of forces deliberately put in motion by the founders and forces that escaped their constitutional planning. Yet, Nabors unjustifiably attributes American society seemingly entirely to their wisdom. I wonder, does he believe the Founders intended the Civil War? If American government has disintegrated in the way (Nabors, p. 40-41) suggests, then the Constitution as written by the Founders was inadequate to prevent this deterioration. The question then becomes, how might the Founders have written the Constitution to forestall this disintegration? More to the present point, the question is, what knowledge would they have needed to prevent this deterioration and why, if they were as knowledgeable as Nabors seems to think, they did not write a constitution that avoided the disintegration of the American polity? Could it be that the American Founders were liable to the problem of policymaker ignorance?

with respect to which policymakers are functionally omniscient and omnipotent. But, this is to say, again, that the argument for technocracy that Professor Nabors thinks he finds in the book is a figment of his pretence of knowledge.