



**HAL**  
open science

# Citizen Knowledge and the debate on information in welfare economics in perspective. Beyond the True-False and the Positive-Normative Entanglements

Antoinette Baujard

## ► To cite this version:

Antoinette Baujard. Citizen Knowledge and the debate on information in welfare economics in perspective. Beyond the True-False and the Positive-Normative Entanglements. 2023. halshs-04841296

**HAL Id: halshs-04841296**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04841296v1>**

Preprint submitted on 16 Dec 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

WP 2421 – December 2024

## **Citizen Knowledge & the debate on information in welfare economics in perspective.**

### **Beyond the True-False and the Positive-Normative Entanglements**

Antoinette Baujard

#### **Abstract:**

This paper shows how the debate on information in Welfare Economics is enriched from the perspective of Lisa Herzog's thesis on citizen knowledge, and conversely. First, the two sources of information for welfare enhancing public decisions, individual utilities and knowledge, need articulated justification, insofar as knowledge may be used to revise individual utilities. The process of preference revisions implicitly assumes the coincidence between knowledge and truth, but there are compelling arguments why this assumption should be debated. Second, public decisions are ultimately based on an additional third component of information: collective ethical norms. They are decisive, but their legitimacy is conditional to their transparency in the debate between experts and citizens. Transparency on which knowledge is judged relevant hence constitutes a minimal condition for the design of democratic infrastructures involving public decision making.

#### **Keywords:**

Knowledge, Information, Welfarism, Demarcation, True-False demarcation, positive normative demarcation, Experts, Citizens, Democratic infrastructures of knowledge, Public decision-making

#### **JEL codes:**

A10, B41, D60, D70, D80

# *Citizen Knowledge & the debate on information in welfare economics in perspective.* **Beyond the True-False and the Positive-Normative Entanglements<sup>1</sup>**

Antoinette Baujard<sup>2</sup>, WP GATE, December 2024

**Abstract.** This paper shows how the debate on information in Welfare Economics is enriched from the perspective of Lisa Herzog's thesis on citizen knowledge, and conversely. First, the two sources of information for welfare enhancing public decisions, individual utilities and knowledge, need articulated justification, insofar as knowledge may be used to revise individual utilities. The process of preference revisions implicitly assumes the coincidence between knowledge and truth, but there are compelling arguments why this assumption should be debated. Second, public decisions are ultimately based on an additional third component of information: collective ethical norms. They are decisive, but their legitimacy is conditional to their transparency in the debate between experts and citizens. Transparency on which knowledge is judged relevant hence constitutes a minimal condition for the design of democratic infrastructures involving public decision making.

**Key-words:** Knowledge, Information, Welfarism, Demarcation, True-False demarcation, positive normative demarcation, Experts, Citizens, Democratic infrastructures of knowledge, Public decision-making

**JEL Codes:** A10, B41, D60, D70, D80

Lisa Herzog's book, *Citizen Knowledge*, focuses on knowledge, markets and democracy. Lisa Herzog elaborates from the claim that we can hardly retrieve reliable knowledge from either the markets or voting expression, and she highlights the knowledge issue. She shows convincingly why this is an urgent and central problem for liberal democracies and people's well-being. Among others, the fact that public decisions are technocratic and that citizens foster resentment against technocracy is a major concern, because it reveals that public procedures depart from democratic principles, and because it is likely to ultimately repel citizens away

---

<sup>1</sup> This text will be published, in open access, in the Journal *Oeconomia*, as a part of a symposium the Symposium on Lisa Herzog's Book entitled *Citizen Knowledge. Markets, Experts, and the Infrastructure of Democracy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. I thank Roberto Fumagalli, Aurélien Goutsmedt and Jean-Sébastien Lenfant for their feedback on previous versions of this paper. The usual caveat holds.

<sup>2</sup> Antoinette Baujard, Université Jean Monnet Saint-Étienne, CNRS, Université Lyon 2, emlyon, GATE Lyon Saint-Étienne UMR 5824, F-42023, Saint-Etienne, France. Orcid : 0000-0002-4156-7527. Contact : Antoinette.baujard@univ-st-etienne.fr.

from the common reference to truth.<sup>3</sup> She catalogues and elaborates every argument to justify the place of knowledge in the present day, and explains when and why some problems occur. She exposes sources of solutions from a methodological investigation—as she makes a case for the need of holistic perspectives—, and from institutionalization—as the regulation of access to knowledge and knowledge process. Her project hence aims to identify how to concretely reform institutions and design regulations to improve of knowledge management. The desirable properties of these novel institutions and regulations are clearly stated: they should fulfill the basic values of democracy, including the ability to involve everyone in collective decision.

Lisa Herzog's stimulating and inspiring book has convinced me that there is such thing as a knowledge issue to cope with in order to defend the values of democracy and agency, and I do share much of her sentiment of urgency. I have then strived to scrutinize what particular form and priority infrastructures should have to circumvent the knowledge issue, which respects the values of democracy and agency.

I concur with Lisa Herzog that economists do not speak much of knowledge—apart from issues of the knowledge economy and innovation. I would however not claim that no economist has ever tackled such questions. There is a field of research in economics that takes hold of these issues seriously, elaborating on (what I have elsewhere called) the “debate on information” (Baujard, 2024). This debate, which scrutinizes which information is relevant or irrelevant for a decision, occurs in every domain of economics where decisions are at stake, whether individual, collective or public. Here is a first instance: The description of goods used in decisions of production, consumption, or allocations requires some assumption on their diversity or homogeneity.<sup>4</sup> The “nomenclature hypothesis” which is the standard norm in economics, amounts to choosing a prior assumption of homogeneity, but this is debatable and optimal decisions are ultimately sensitive to the assumption chosen to describe these goods (Gradoz, 2024). That said, most instances of the debate on information belong to welfare economics.

Let us recall why information is a key issue for welfare economics in the first place. When there are market failures—including externalities, spillovers, public goods—, then the information conveyed by prices is insufficient or unreliable, and one cannot straightforwardly assess what would be a good policy. Welfare economics is then called to intervene. Before all, it scrutinizes which information is (or is not) relevant for the evaluation of social states, the evaluation of public policy and the help of collective decision making. Questioning relevance implies whether the decision (or evaluation) based on this information will be able to be rational, adapted, efficient, fair and respectful or not of every kind of normative properties. Selecting an informational basis for decisions is both a commitment as to which pieces of information we look at and which ones we overlook. The debate on the informational basis of welfare economics has been popularized by Sen in the first place (Sen, 1977 and 1979). He used the term “welfarism” in the 1970s to highlight the consequences of the restriction of information to the detriment of others. Welfare economics is welfarist because it considers that social welfare only depends on individual well-being, and also because it associates individual well-being only with subjective ordinal, non-comparable, unidimensional, monist utilities.

---

<sup>3</sup> L. Herzog defines ‘technocracy’, and equivalently ‘expertocracy’, as a form of degeneration of the place that experts should have in society when their voice is “absolutized and taken to be all that matters for decision-making, especially in the political realm.” (81).

<sup>4</sup> Such an issue has also been raised and analyzed by Ian Carter (1996). Choosing among a set of ten identical toothpastes does not give you the same freedom of choice as choosing among a set of ten different brands of toothpastes offering a scope of various relevant characteristics. Depending on what is the relevant nature of a unit of good, goods homogeneity should be assumed or not. Hence, the granularity of the description of such goods must be decided to measure the freedom of choice of a set of goods.

There may be other valuable information, including the survival of a specie, the sustainability of a river, the objective quality of life of women, how humans are dependent from one another, species and planets, the fact that some subalterns are oppressed, that some are given asymmetric rights, and that others suffer from living in a world of un-adapted norms, and so on. But those are irrelevant from the perspective of welfarism, apart from their instrumental contribution to individual subjective utilities.

The link between the debate on information in welfare economics and the knowledge issue analyzed by Lisa Herzog is direct when she tackles the difficulties of indicators in the context of new public management, or in her discussion on which kind of individual utilities are or are not relevant; it is also sometimes indirect when she discusses expert knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Each of these analyses offers a perspective on a similar issue: what should be legitimately considered for public decision? I now intend to parallel the economics debate on information with Lisa Herzog's contribution. I will show how her book raises novel questions and provides novel answers to the debate on information in economics, which, in turns, offers another perspective on Lisa's knowledge problem. Firstly, I will show that (1) Lisa Herzog's thorough discussion on expert knowledge indirectly contributes to the literature on the criticism of welfarism and preferences revision. Secondly, I will insist on (2) the inextricability of normative issues with expert based public decisions, and analyze how, as a consequence, the debate between experts and laymen should be organized.

## 1. Articulating utility and knowledge

### 1.1. The implicit assumption of welfare economics on the false-true demarcation

The discussion introduced by Lisa Herzog as to which relevant utilities should be retained typically belongs to the standard literature on the informational basis of welfare economics. On the one hand, Lisa Herzog claims that experts' knowledge constitutes a relevant piece of information that should be considered seriously, in complement with individual well-beings. She therefore introduces the necessity of articulating information on individual satisfaction and experts' interventions. I claim that this articulation between subjective well-being and scientific knowledge is scarcely considered within economics; and when it does, it comes with difficulties. On the other hand, welfarism focus on preferences.<sup>6</sup> In particular, welfarism in

---

<sup>5</sup> Insofar as vocabulary varies from one discipline to another, it is worth specifying the meaning of some terms I will use in this paper. There may be a search for truth or an ideal reference to true assertions in science, but, "there is no such thing as uncontroversial social scientific knowledge" (Reiss, 2019); should there be, there is no way that human beings may ever have access to it without bias. Knowledge is what gathers and offers an expert, focused on his area of competency and experience. Experts may be scientists (or not), but they are called experts when a client commands them to intervene and that their involvement will be used to come up with a public decision. Laymen knowledge, as phrased by Herzog, comes at what individuals value as relevant and important information, which is captured by individual preferences in welfare economics. Information corresponds to every ingredient used to take a decision, including knowledge, individual preferences and, as I shall introduce below, collective ethical norms.

<sup>6</sup> Rather than welfarism, many philosophers favor preference-based approaches, which ground welfare evaluations on information concerning individuals' preferences, and posit different relations between preference satisfaction and welfare. For instance, Fumagalli (2024) uses "the term 'PREF' broadly to encompass both approaches that take preference satisfaction to constitute welfare [...] and approaches that take preference satisfaction to merely provide evidence for welfare .... These approaches differ in significant respects ... but share the aim to vindicate economists' practice of making inferences concerning well-being from people's preferences" (for a comparative assessment of the merits of different kinds of preference-based approaches, see e.g. Fumagalli, 2021, Hausman, 2011).

welfare economics implies two sorts of restrictions. First, any other potential element to describe well-being but utility should be ruled out, including, e.g., the respect of human rights, freedom of choice, objective achievements, the intrinsic value of equality, aversion towards inequality... Second, for reasons which are proper to the inner dynamic of the discipline, only subjective ordinal interpersonally non comparable utilities are considered relevant.<sup>7</sup> These two sorts of restrictions come with a number of limitations highlighted and analyzed in the post-welfarist literature.

A number of authors have considered the importance of selecting or correcting preferences.<sup>8</sup> In particular, when choices are considered to be the manifestation of preferences, we should be aware that certain choices are based on incomplete information (Goodin, 1986), or incomplete awareness of the components of the opportunity set (Gibbard, 1986), framing effects and irrationalities (Kanheman and Tversky, 1981). More generally, utilitarians have come to realize that, as some individuals' preferences may be irrational, based on incomplete information or false beliefs, relevant preferences to measure well-being are not actual preferences (Griffin 1986). For instance, should an individual have different beliefs, her or his preferences would be different. As a consequence, (observable or self-stated) actual individual preferences depend on the belief contexts, and it is therefore difficult to claim that subjective individual preferences constitute the uncontroversially unique sacred source of normative information. It is therefore primarily necessary to debias preferences on the basis of correct beliefs, i.e. to rely on corrected preferences rather than actual preferences.

For these various reasons, welfare economics evolved. Being welfarist does not imply to restrict its attention to utility information only. Sound knowledge also constitute some relevant information, knowledge being an aid for better identifying well-being in the measuring of social welfare.

However, the process of “laundering” preferences still requires serious justifications (Goodin, 1986), in particular in the case of liberal paternalism (Fumagalli, 2016). The liberal paternalism approach considers that individual preferences – e.g., the preferences that the individual would have, should they be rational and fully informed – are the ultimate justifications for these corrections. The circularity of the argument is nevertheless highlighted under the name of the “reconciliation problem” (Sugden and McQuillin, 2012; Lecouteux 2022). One potential consequence is that preferences may be irrelevant, implying the definitive undermining of welfarism, in whichever definition (Sugden, 2018). An alternative—on which we focus here—, is that, should preferences have any relevance at all, elaborating these justifications need information which, by construction, are not conveyed in subjective preferences (Goodin, 1986). Hence there are other information but preferences considered as relevant to justify preference laundering, and this raises novel fundamental questions: Upon which criterion or which condition can a preference be corrected? who is entitled to formulate preferences correction? what is ultimately a correct belief? is there such thing as a corrected

---

<sup>7</sup> The history of economics describes why certain restriction of information have emerged and why welfare economists standardly focus on “welfarist information.” (Baujard, 2017, 2022, Backhouse et al., 2021)

<sup>8</sup> Here are a few instances. First, Harsanyi (1955) makes a distinction between subjective preferences and ethical preferences: the former correspond to actual preferences, the latter correspond to what would be individual preferences, should they be unbiased, impartial and impersonal. Second, the principle of equality of utility is consistent only if each individual's utility only counts for one. However, considering each individual's utility implies double count of certain individual if some have altruistic preferences towards them, or shadowing others when some have sadistic preferences towards them. Equality of utility hence requires to exclude other-regarding preferences from relevant preferences (Barry, 1965; Dworkin, 1981). Considering that Sen's theorem of the Paretian liberal (1970) established that some kind of other-regarding “nosy” preferences may induce social choice inconsistencies, Goodin (1986) raises the question whether “nosy” preferences should be in consideration.

preference based on true and complete information, uncontroversially axiologically neutral and respectful of the genuine individual preferences?

Preference correction implies to imagine what the preferences of an individual would be under correct beliefs rather than false beliefs. A necessary (and not sufficient) condition to design corrected preferences is that true and relevant information can be demarcated from fake news, junk science and irrelevant manipulations based on vested interests, and that every stakeholder is able to properly identify it. Using available knowledge, if the fake was hardly sorted out from the true, it would be hard to guarantee that preferences are correctly revised. In most papers on preference correction, the assumption that the false-true demarcation is possible, comes as an implicit prior. Should experts tell an uncontroversial truth, then those who do have access to it are entitled to participate in the process of preference correction. Experts may eventually know better than the individuals whose preferences are being studied. The preference correction process results in an asymmetric power given to experts to define welfare, while it retrieves, at least partly, the ability of defining the relevant information on their well-being from the citizen themselves.

This outcome comes as a strange paradox. Welfarism was primarily justified in order to respect individuals' voices only, protect individuals' freedom, and by the fear that the consideration objective information would give too much importance to experts and planners (all this in the context of the cold war opposing communism to liberal democracies, as highlighted by Amadae, 2003 or Baujard, 2017). Welfare economists have paid severe attention to kick out experts by the door; the necessity of correcting preferences now makes them come back by the window. In this context, the assumption of the false-true demarcation appears as a necessary brick in the wall, to avoid the complete collapse of the justification of welfarism in welfare economics.

## 1.2. The entanglement of truth and knowledge in the post-truth area

Because she focuses on the knowledge issues in our concrete societies, Lisa Herzog does not retain the false-true demarcation assumption a priori. She undertakes a systematic scrutiny of the validity of this assumption on the basis of a considerable literature, among others from the social studies of science. As a consequence, she takes seriously what it means to now live in a "post-truth era". A post-truth era does not imply that there cannot be any reference to truth: Truth can be and must remain a reference. The access to truth, by contrast, is more debatable. Herzog rather claims that knowledge as such should not be taken as obvious truth, wherever it comes from.

Before all, there may be fake news. Some are introduced and spread on social media with an intention, where truth, to say the least, is not the ultimate reference. Fake news may influence everybody's perception of the truth. This may not affect the inner scientific debates as such and the credibility of scientists for citizens, as those "continue to be seen as one of the most trustworthy professions" (1). However, that it may influence public debate on decisions is a matter of great concern.

Secondly, the science process makes true information only partly known, or still unknown at different moments through time (76). Let some scientific results published in the scientific literature come with the conclusion that what is best for your well-being requires something you do not want—e.g. you do not want to take hydroxychloroquine because you have bad feeling about it—furthermore not yet supported by other published papers in scientific journals. Is an expert entitled to "revise your preference" and make you taking this drug in spite of your subjective preference? Waiting for a while would show that your intuitions were right, as this molecule has been soon proven to be inefficient and dangerous. Any scientific assertions, proven at one moment of the time, supported by few isolated articles, may not appear

sufficiently decisive to say what should be – and therefore to justify to revise individual preferences. On the contrary, at some point in time, an assertion becomes accepted beyond reasonable doubt. For instance, “doubt” regarding the anthropogenic climate change “is no longer reasonable” (120). On the other hand, this argument may also be used as a strategy to undermine the credibility of scientific results, as the well-known tobacco example presented below will illustrate.

Thirdly, Herzog describes cases of more or less conscious and self-interested manipulation of scientific knowledge. It is now uncontroversially proven that the scientific knowledge on the tobacco impact on health has been intentionally obfuscated, slowed down and undermined by systematic strategies of doubts (117 and 195; see also Oreskes and Conway, 2010). We cannot be blind to the fact that there is always a risk that this phenomenon may exist on every topic where scientific knowledge has important economic, social, environmental stakes, and which induces strong conflicting interests. Some may have interests in influencing the production of knowledge in a direction, which may generate some discrepancy, at least for a moment, between knowledge and truth. Whether we need to take current scientific knowledge in spite of the doubt, or without doubt is therefore not an easy question.

Fourthly, knowledge is asymmetrically accessible, and the fact that some know more than others is unavoidable. Every public decision requires at least relevant description and understanding of the situation (Sen, 1967). The necessity of knowledge hence justifies to rely on experts, defined as those who do know more and will provide relevant knowledge for decisions. Besides, the interests of experts and their clients do not always exactly coincide. For instance, “an individual medical doctor may face a conflict of interest between the best advice for a patient and his own financial interests and may be tempted to, say, use more diagnostic tests than necessary.” (79) Experts are not just science tellers, they are also flesh and blood individuals with a life, personal ambition, embedded in a professional surroundings and constraints. Whether conscious or not, whether intentional or not, experts’ speeches may entangle interests. Because of asymmetric knowledge and conflicts of interests, experts have both a possibility and an incentive to decorate the spoken knowledge in their own interests. “This possible discrepancy between the incentive structures and the ‘right thing’ to do is particularly difficult to control by formal means because experts can always claim to have acted in good faith” (179). This situation explains both why knowledge integrity rules are essential, and also why they may not be sufficient in the end to guarantee there will never be such difficulty. As a consequence, citizens may not always believe everything that any experts may say. At the public level, that citizens cannot control experts’ knowledge and interests is likely to feed resentment and to raise suspicions against technocratic decisions (1 and 177).

Let us now reconsider the false-true demarcation introduced above. We have described how welfarist welfare economics needed to make the prior assumption that true and relevant knowledge could be demarcated from false knowledge, in order to justify preference revision. In light of these four characteristics of knowledge in the post-truth era, this assumption may be requalified as a confusion between truth and knowledge. Herzog’s book warns us against this confusion. Obstinate facts, as the phenomena of knowledge factories, as well as conflicts of interest in the context of asymmetric information between experts and citizens, undermine the assumption that it is always possible to disentangle truth and knowledge. We should acknowledge that this demarcation may be difficult. In concrete situations, the naivety of the confusion between truth and knowledge is a sin, which comes in contradiction with the basic justification of welfarism. The book rather calls for action: we need to be able to disentangle manipulated knowledge and correct information in order to reinstall the actual reference to truth in the post-truth area. This is a necessary condition to respect the values of liberal democracies and individual autonomy.



Being aware that this assumption is not reasonable at the first place is a prior condition to design information processing for public decisions, in respect of the values of liberal democracies.

## 2. Disentangling values, preferences and knowledge

### 2.1. The diversity of knowledge for public decisions

If a given person were able to properly judge the coincidence of truth and knowledge, as in Plato's ideal, we could all rely on this unique person to revise our preferences. Even ignoring potential conflicts of interests for now, Plato's ideal is hardly acceptable because of the consequence of an inevitable fact, that expert knowledge is highly specialized (72 and 177). For almost everything "we rely on information, knowledge, and expertise from others"; this divided epistemic labor induces a dependence on experts (177). We most often accept it, but we also observe growing situations of distrust and fear of technocracy, insofar as some may be seen "as holding too much power over laypeople, concentrated in too few hands, with too little accountability." (182)

Inquiry on the origin of this mistrust may come from a confusion between the respective role of experts and politicians, which today must be described differently than in Weber's times. Herzog insists on the importance of reallocating roles: politicians (representing citizens) should be choosing goals, while experts should be only helping them in this direction:

"Scientific knowledge can and often should play a role in political decision-making. What is problematic, (...) is, first, the assumption that it is scientific knowledge alone that should be counted as expertise, and, second, the assumption that expertise alone could decide questions that are, strictly speaking, beyond its scope. Political decisions can never be based on descriptions of facts, mechanisms, or causal relations alone; there always also needs to be a premise that concerns the goals that are to be pursued, which, ultimately, needs to be based on certain values or interests. The latter need to be combined with descriptions of facts to arrive at guidance for action, and factual experts are not experts in this regard." (83)

The role of experts is not just to process knowledge mechanically, but, given goals, values and interests, to choose how to process it in order to come to a public decision. An issue therefore occurs if experts are influential in choosing goals themselves, rather than contending to help decision-making given such goals. To do this, I suggest to shift the question within the debate on information in welfare economics. In normative economics widely speaking, goals are assumed to be chosen by a benevolent planner, while economists contend with finding best means to achieve these goals (Robbins, 1932; Mongin 2002; Atkinson, 2002, 2009). Value transparency is a key condition to guarantee the proper allocation of tasks between scientists and politicians (Baujard, 2022). Reformulating Herzog's focus on the diversity of knowledge in this specific context shall help to first analyze the nature of the various different pieces of information which are decisive, and secondly check how relevant information emerges, is identified and processed.

### 2.2. Collective Norms as a necessary additional Information

For welfare economics, individual utility should be the normative source of information for public decisions because utility captures what ultimately counts for individuals, hence for the society. In the case of the highly uncertain and unprecedented Covid-19 situation, the least we could say is that individual preferences were not the most reliable sources of information for well-being. As a consequence, if individual preferences should be the compass of any policy,

they should be completed and revised on the basis of well-reflected knowledge.<sup>9</sup> We now need to identify exactly what is needed to make a public decision, beside scientific knowledge and individual preferences.

As highlighted by Herzog, the views of experts coming from various scientific communities may conflict with one another. Taking the case of Covid policies as an instance, health experts structurally focus on certain populations whose survival was made vulnerable to the pandemic; by contrast, education experts structurally focus on other populations, whose studies and long-term skills and opportunities were impacted by repeated lockdowns. Their policy recommendations typically diverge from one another. It does not uncover insufficient knowledge in health or in education. No better research could decide whether the policy driven by health concerns should be recommended rather than the policy driven by education concerns – or the converse. It would still hold in the total absence of conflict of interest and homogeneous individual preferences. Hence this conflict is somehow irreducible, because in the way we introduced this example, it uniquely results from the fact that public decisions should be based on a variety of perspectives, health *and* education (rather than health *or* education), each of which uncontroversially impacts different populations. Recommendations from both experts are inconsistent, but they are however equally valuable, and incommensurable.

In such public decisions (e.g., regarding Covid policy) a choice of policy amounts to a choice of dimension. A strict lockdown reveals a priority to health over education, which will end in favoring the elderly to the younger generation; a (partial or) absence of lockdown reveals the converse.

Which dimension should be the right priority? As we have seen, more knowledge will not help to answer this question; in the strict welfarist framework, only individual preferences should. Indeed, individuals (may) have various preferences on which dimension should be given a priority. If they concur and select one dimension, then we expect that the processing of individual preferences on the one hand and relevant knowledge from two sorts of experts on the other hand will induce a policy recommendation. However, preferences may be heterogenous. That preferences may be inconsistent with one another is nothing but the recognition that there is a plurality of people, whose specific interests may conflict but all of which are legitimate in the first place. Deriving a social choice on the basis of individual preferences only may be impossible (Arrow 1963).<sup>10</sup> And we are, again, likely to fail to come up with a priority. Hence welfarist rules, even if enriched with relevant pieces of knowledge, will generate an incomplete ranking of potential policies, hence no clear-cut public decision.

Facing the diversity of dimensions and the diversity of preferences, choosing which information is relevant and which is irrelevant is crucial. Let us repeat that this choice is neither implied by individual preferences nor by any pieces of knowledge. It requires in addition some information going beyond ethical individualism, which emerge at the collective level, because of the implication of a plurality of persons. Let us call this choice a collective ethical norm. This norm may include the priority of dimensions, the relevant standing of stakeholders, the

---

<sup>9</sup> Recall that revisions of preferences, as we have just shown in the previous section, should not always be taken for granted without further scrutiny.

<sup>10</sup> In case of disagreement, it is fair to say that there will always exist one voting process able to sort them out. However different voting processes are most likely to come up with different decisions (among others, Baujard et al 2014). Choosing a rule may amount to choose an outcome. Should we shift the debate toward the choice of a rule we would be back to another social choice question: how we should choose collectively the properties of a rule (Patty and Penn 2014). The legitimacy of a rule ultimately relies on its acceptability by the voting body (Urfalino 2014). This property refers to some ethical norms, which cannot be revealed by any kind of scientific knowledge or by individual preferences.

trade-offs which are made among the interests of diverse populations. Should the ethical norm be different, for given knowledge and given preferences, the public decision should be different.

This situation now raises a positive question: In the current situation, how does an ethical norm emerge? Who imposes it and eventually influences the policy decision? Identifying the origin of a norm is therefore crucial to discuss the legitimacy of final decision, and to understand why some citizens fosters some resentment, when they do.

### 2.3. Information in deliberation

To face the issue of resentment against experts and their asymmetric power, Lisa Herzog concludes that experts and laymen should be put at the same level, and deliberation would generate the re-articulation of their respective knowledge. Under which conditions the desired articulation is likely to emerge however remains underspecified?

I suggest to reformulate Herzog's argument in the perspective of normative economics described above. Let us now consider that collective ethical norms come as a third ingredient among information users to derive a collective decision, in addition to preferences and knowledge. In this perspective, we can show that what is decisive in the arena where experts and individuals interact is the way such norms—e.g., a priority among dimensions, as illustrated above—emerge, are selected and discussed. I therefore claim that the infrastructure of democracy should be thought with respect to the conditions of the elaboration of these norms: Those who will ultimately decide which dimension is a priority are dominant,<sup>11</sup> and their ability to determine silently the priorities that will influence the collective decision is a manifestation of power. Such potential inequities are specifically targeted by Lisa Herzog in her quest for an infrastructure consistent with democratic values. I now consider potential sources of inequities, trace potential organization of the articulation between laymen and experts, and derive one condition for this virtuous articulation.

First, one institutional aim is to guarantee that influential information does not derive exclusively from a given class of people, or from a specific type of person, rather than from the plurality of views. For instance, equity can be violated if some people talk more than others in a deliberation. However, even in case of equal talking times, inequity may occur when some are likely to be more convincing, not because their arguments are more compelling, but because they have an experience of talking in public, are used to being obeyed, are self-confident, or have some kind of symbolic aspects of authority (Girard, 2019).<sup>12</sup> Coming with the authority of knowledge, experts typically have a natural ability to convince more than laymen. Giving equal time of expression to experts and laymen is therefore likely to induce an unequal representation to the advantage of the former. By contrast with the infrastructure of democracy desired by Lisa Herzog which requires a symmetric position of experts and laymen, we claim that giving either equal, more or less weight to experts or laymen is hardly justifiable, and that they should intervene differently in the debate.

Second, the status of experts is supposed to be different from that of laymen: The former ones provide necessary knowledge; the latter, as a collective body, is legitimate to formulate normative claims, e.g., to choose the priority order between dimensions. If this separation of roles were straightforward, it would be sufficient to teach each individual at the first stage, and subsequently, to take a decision only on the basis of their now informed individual

---

<sup>11</sup> Including those who wraps up the outcome of deliberation without necessarily phrasing which dimensional or population priority they made.

<sup>12</sup> Alternatively, there sometimes emerge some self-regulating process in which big mouths are gently silenced by the collective pressure, expecting others to speak (CESE 2024).

preferences.<sup>13</sup> However it can still happen that, after the teaching stage, individuals resist to expert knowledge, and that some individual preferences still seem debatable to experts. Among the many reasons for this conflict, a potential one derives from discrepancies in the collective ethical norms, e.g. the priority between dimensions. For instance, the teaching stage only involved experts in health, while citizens expected to learn about education. Although citizens could be well convinced that the health argument was “true”, they could judge this teaching phase underwhelming, because “irrelevant” (or only subsidiary) as compared to another dimension.<sup>14</sup> Here the conflict does not rely on whether individual preferences are based on true or false beliefs, but on which type of knowledge is ultimately relevant (Sen 1967).

Third, because who decides which information is relevant is key in the final decision, the control of the agenda is itself key: what dimensions are to be discussed, which experts should be invited, in which order they shall present their conclusions. If this agenda choice is made silently, there is a potential for serving vested interests, manipulation, and in general unequal representation. Conversely, the agenda regarding the chosen dimensions could be an object, not only of publicity, but also of debate. Most decisive points concern how questions are asked, how the agenda is made, and how they are summarized by whom is in charge to do so. The tiniest details of the organization of the public debate may have their importance because everybody, experts and citizens, should be able to be aware of the importance of hierarchy of dimensions (and more generally ethical norms) in the resulting decisions.

As a consequence, the issue at stake is not so much how knowledge should be shared or how it should be regulated. A necessary (and non-sufficient) condition for respecting the role of experts and laymen, and for an equitable participation of individuals in the collective decision is to uncover the importance of ethical norms and to make them transparent. These ethical norms are decisive to identify which information is relevant or not, and for determining the hierarchy of various relevant information. This perspective, in line with the typical approach of normative economics highlighted above, can contribute to Lisa Herzog’s quest of designing better knowledge infrastructure for democracy, by stating one primary necessary condition: any organization of deliberation and use of knowledge for public decision should primarily make transparent the collective ethical norms to be used in their screening of relevant knowledge.

### 3. A conclusion on democratic infrastructure of knowledge

Herzog’s book takes knowledge issues seriously, and comes as an invitation to think which design of democracy and autonomy-friendly institutions are likely to circumvent knowledge issues.

First, preference revisions in welfare economics rely implicitly on the assumption that truth and knowledge are the same; and, if not, fake and true assertions can be straightforwardly disentangled, such that it is possible to rely on true assertions only. Herzog shows that this confusion does not resist to facts. Taking her thesis seriously introduces a novel criticism of the welfarist approach and of the preference-based approach, and my reconstruction shows that a solution to it will require awareness and in-depth discussions.

Second, while the decision process is based on the implicit assumption that positive and normative information can be disentangled, their actual entanglement should be acknowledged. Knowledge and preferences cannot come up to a public decision alone, because of the incommensurability of pieces of knowledge and the diversity of individual preferences. A

---

<sup>13</sup> This description corresponds to the standard process of citizens’ assembly (OECD 2020, Reber 2023).

<sup>14</sup> The same analysis would, no need to say, hold with a teaching phase focusing on education while citizens would be primarily interested in the health dimension.

decision ultimately requires some additional ethical norms, which are a matter of debate at the collective level. Information in society can hardly be considered in total ignorance of normative issues, because any public decision requires not only to process preferences and dimensions, but also derives from the choice as to which knowledge is relevant or not, and which is a priority compared with others. It is crucial that the public debate allows transparency on how these norms are introduced.

The infrastructure of public decisions must account for the entanglement of both issues. Deliberation processes should reflect on their use of knowledge and promote transparency about the hierarchy of dimensions involved in every public decisions.

## References

- Amadae, Sonja M. 2003. *Rationalizing Capitalist Democracy. The Cold War Origins of Rational Choice Liberalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Arrow, Kenneth J. 1963. *Social Choice and Individual Values*. New York: Wiley.
- Atkinson, Anthony B. 2001. The strange disappearance of welfare economics, *Kyklos*, 54(2-3): 193–206.
- Atkinson, Anthony B. 2009. Economics as a moral science, *Economica*, 76(1): 791–804.
- Barry, Brian. 1965. *Political Argument*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Backhouse, Robert, Antoinette Baujard and Tamotsu Nishizawa (eds.) 2021. *Welfare Theory, Public Action and Ethical Values: Revisiting the history of welfare economics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Baujard Antoinette, Frédéric Gavrel, Herrade Igersheim, Jean-François Laslier, Isabelle Lebon. 2014. Who's favored by Evaluative Voting? An experiment conducted during the 2012 French Presidential Election. *Electoral Studies*, 34(2): 131–145.
- Baujard, Antoinette. 2013. Value Judgments and Economics Expertise. WP GATE 1314.
- Baujard, Antoinette. 2017. L'économie du bien-être est morte. Vive l'économie du bien-être ! » In *Philosophie économique*. Jean-Sébastien Gharbi et Gilles Campagnolo (Eds.) Paris : Éditions Matériologiques, 77-128.
- Baujard, Antoinette. 2021. Values in Welfare Economics. In *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Economics*. Julian Reiss and Conrad Heilmann (Eds.). New York: Routledge: 211-222.
- Baujard Antoinette. 2024. Penser l'aide à la décision publique autrement. Amartya Sen et le débat sur l'information. *Cités*, 2(98): 47- 61.
- Carter, Ian. 1996. *A measure of freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- CESE. 2023. *Rapport sur la convention citoyenne sur la fin de vie*. Conseil économique, social et environnemental.
- Dworkin, Ronald. 1981. What is equality? part 1: Equality of welfare / part 2: Equality of resources. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 10(3/4), 185–246 / 283–345.
- Fumagalli, Roberto. 2016. Decision sciences and the new case for paternalism: three welfare-related justificatory challenges. *Social Choice and Welfare*, 47(2): 459–480.
- Fumagalli, Roberto. 2021. Theories of well-being and well-being policy: A view from methodology. *Journal of Economic Methodology*, 28(1): 124-133.
- Fumagalli, Roberto. 2024. Preferences versus Opportunities: On the Conceptual Foundations of Normative Welfare Economics. *Economics & Philosophy*, 40(1): 77-101.
- Girard, Charles. 2019. *Délibérer entre égaux*. Enquête sur l'idéal démocratique, Paris : Vrin.
- Goodin, Robert E. 1986. Laundering preferences. In Jon Elster et Aamund Hylland (Eds.), *Foundations of social choice Theory*, 75–101. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gradoz, Julien. 2024. The nomenclature assumption in demand theory, CHOPE Working Paper No. 2024-08.
- Griffin, James. 1986. *Well-being: Its meaning, measurement, and moral importance*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Harsanyi, John. 1955. Cardinal Welfare, Individualistic Ethics, and Interpersonal Comparisons of Utility. *Journal of Political Economy*, 63(4): 309-321.
- Hausman, Daniel M. 2011. *Preference, Value, Choice, and Welfare*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Lecouteux, Guilhem. 2022. Reconciling Normative and Behavioural Economics: The Problem that Cannot Be Solved. In Sina. Badieli et Agnès Grivaux (Eds.), *The Positive and Normative in Economic Thought*, 148-166. London: Routledge

- OECD. 2020. *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave*. OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/339306da-en>.
- Oreskes, Naomi, and Eric Conway. 2010. *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Reber, Bernard. 2023. *Responsible Deliberation, between Conversation and Consideration. Conditions for a Great Democratic Debate*. New York: Wiley.
- Reiss, Julian. 2019. Expertise, Agreement, and the Nature of Social Scientific Facts or: Against Epistocracy. *Social Epistemology*, 33(2): 183-192.
- Robbins, Lionel. 1932. *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*. London: Macmillan.
- Mongin, Philippe. 2006. Value Judgments and Value Neutrality in Economics, *Economica*, 73(290): 257–286
- Sen, Amartya K. 1967. The Nature and Classes of Prescriptive Judgements, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 17(66): 46-62
- Sen, Amartya K. 1970. The impossibility of a Paretian liberal. *Journal of Political Economy*, 78(1): 152-157.
- Sen, Amartya K. 1977. On Weights and Measures: Informational Constraints in Social Welfare Analysis, *Econometrica*, 45(7): 1539-1572
- Sen, Amartya K. 1979. Personal Utilities and Public Judgements: Or What's Wrong with Welfare Economics? *Economic Journal*, 89(355): 537-58.
- Sen, Amartya K. 2009. *The idea of justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Sugden, Robert. 2018. *The Community of Advantage: A Behavioural Economist's Defence of the Market*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sugden, Robert, and Ben McQuillin. 2012. Reconciling normative and behavioural economics: the problems to be solved. *Social Choice and Welfare*, 38(4): 553–567.