

ARTICLE

# Echo Chambers and Friendship

Alper Güngör 

McGill University, Montreal H3A 0G4, Canada  
Email: [alper.gungor@mail.mcgill.ca](mailto:alper.gungor@mail.mcgill.ca)

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## Abstract

Are the members of echo chambers blameworthy for their beliefs? If we follow Sarah Stroud's account of friendship, we end up with the following conclusion: if echo chambers involve friendship, then the individuals have strong reasons not to live up to epistemic demands or ideals when the friendships are formed in the echo chambers they are members of. This result stands in striking contrast with the received view, according to which the members of echo chambers are blameworthy for their epistemic vices and faulty beliefs. The received view uses individual epistemic vices to propose individualistic solutions for the problem of echo chambers. I argue that this is misleading, simply because the members of echo chambers are not blameworthy due to the friendships cultivated in the echo chambers.

**Keywords:** Echo chambers; Epistemic bubbles; polarization; epistemic partiality; friendship

## 1. Introduction

The latest machine-learning technologies have extremely facilitated the forming of communities. This is because now each internet user, depending on their usage history gets highly tailored content. As the content gets homogenized and the stream of alternative views is left out, the users segregate into certain online communities on social media such as Facebook, Reddit, and Twitter. The phenomenon is ubiquitous, and it has a name: echo chambers

Matteo Cinelli *et al.* (2021) explore the social effects of echo chambers on social media and include “blogs, forums and social media sites” in their list of online echo chambers. Although online communities provide one of the most pressing cases of echo chambers, the phenomenon is not limited to the internet. Thi Chi Nguyen (2020) defines echo chamber as “a social epistemic structure from which other relevant voices have been actively excluded and discredited.” These social epistemic structures can take many forms. Nguyen (2020) lists some fitness communities such as Paleo and CrossFit as echo chambers. Kathleen Jamieson and Joseph Cappella (2008) list certain segregation of political audiences such as the passionate audiences of the late notorious commentator Rush Limbaugh as echo chambers. Many agree on the common characterization of echo chambers, that echo chambers are epistemic structures

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in which repeated interaction fortifies the prevalent views while excluding and discrediting others (Cinelli M. *et al.* 2021; Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Nguyen 2020). However, as Nguyen (2020) rightly points out, the common characterization fails to distinguish epistemic bubbles from echo chambers and conflates the two distinct social phenomena.

This paper exclusively focuses on echo chambers instead of epistemic bubbles. By following Nguyen's (2020) conceptual distinction between echo chambers and epistemic bubbles, I take it that epistemic bubbles are not durable against contrary evidence. Being part of an epistemic bubble is always an accident; there simply has not been a steady source of alternative views. Once the bubble is exposed to these alternative views or contrary evidence, it bursts. But contrary to epistemic bubbles, echo chambers are resilient to the stream of alternative views and contrary evidence (Nguyen 2020). The members of echo chambers are partial to the views prevalent in a given echo chamber. Furthermore, the exposition of alternative views makes the bonding among the members of echo chambers stronger. That is why the case of echo chambers is a more pressing issue than the case of epistemic bubbles and if we want to fully understand this phenomenon, we should pay closer attention to its formation. To that end, in relation to echo chambers, this paper explores another social phenomenon that might lead to epistemic partiality: Friendship. Friendship entails nurturing bonds between individuals, and in certain accounts, these bonds may conflict with epistemic impartiality. After fleshing out the link between the echo chambers and friendship, I discuss an important implication of considering them together.

Here is the structure of the paper: in Section 2, I lay out the prominent background views on moral responsibility and echo chambers. This section discusses the plausibility of the prevalent moral intuition that the epistemic practices of the members of echo chambers are blameworthy for the faulty beliefs of the members. My conclusion is that they are not, and the main reason is friendship. But before explaining the link between friendship and echo chambers, I devote Section 3 to the exposition of a prominent account of friendship. In this section, I briefly summarize Sarah Stroud's (2006) argument from partiality, according to which friendship involves epistemic partiality. Then, building on Stroud's account of friendship, in Section 4, I present my view on echo chambers: the members of echo chambers are less blameworthy than the received view takes them to be. In this section, I have an auxiliary aim: to show that many echo chambers involve friendship. Lastly, in Section 5, I consider the crucial implications of my view, and in Section 6, I answer several objections.

## 2. Blameworthiness and echo chambers

Echo chambers are bad. They are bad for many reasons, to enumerate a few: bad for democracy;<sup>1</sup> have bad "sociological effects" such as seeing other groups as enemies (Jamieson and Cappella 2008); bad because of propagating epistemic vices (Baumgaertner 2014; Nguyen 2020). There is a consensus on the existence of negative effects of echo chambers. What is less clear is the answer to the question of who is morally responsible. Are the members of echo chambers blameworthy? Nguyen formulates this question in explicit terms as follows: "Could one behave epistemically virtuously, and yet remain caught within an echo chamber or epistemic bubble? In other words, to what degree is an epistemic agent embedded within such a structure blameworthy,

<sup>1</sup><https://www.wired.com/2016/11/filter-bubble-destroying-democracy/>.

or blameless, for the faultiness of their beliefs?” (Nguyen 2020: 24) The answer according to the received view is yes.<sup>2</sup> Members of echo chambers are blameworthy, and this is partly because of their bad epistemic practices. For instance, Quassim Cassam (2016) claims that epistemic vices such as ignoring the contrary evidence are bad, and individuals are blameworthy when they commit epistemic vices such as laziness. Here is how Cassam describes a conspiracy believer named Oliver:

The fact that this is how he goes about his business is a reflection of his intellectual character. He ignores critical evidence because he is grossly negligent, he relies on untrustworthy sources because he is gullible, he jumps to conclusions because he is lazy and careless. He is neither a responsible nor an effective inquirer, and it is the influence of his intellectual character traits which is responsible for this. (Cassam 2016: 164)

According to Cassam, Oliver’s epistemic practices are extremely flawed, and they are flawed partly because of the individual epistemic vices he commits. Due to his “intellectual character,” Oliver deserves to be morally blameworthy. Similarly, members of echo chambers ignore contrary evidence and thus they exercise epistemic vices. It should be noted that epistemic vices do not automatically entail blameworthiness. However, as the above quote exemplifies there is a shared intuition that the epistemic practices exercised in the echo chambers are blameworthy. In *The Big Sort*, pointing out the harmful sociological effects of echo chambers, Bill Bishop claims that there are all kinds of media input, yet people “self-segregate into their own gated media communities” (Bishop 2009: 81). Bert Baumgaertner (2014) observes that individual bad epistemic practices lead to the formation of echo chambers and suggests that by adopting impartiality one can reverse the bad epistemic practices associated with echo chambers: “It seems plausible that one can resist the formation of an echo chamber, or at least resist the effects of one, by impartially seeking out people to interact with and allowing oneself to be informed by their opinion.” So it seems that it is the burden of the individual to not commit epistemic vices. Similarly, in “How to Escape Echo Chambers” Nguyen (2018) prescribes a Cartesian epistemic reboot for members of echo chambers to eliminate the formation of echo chambers. This strategy briefly suggests that members of echo chambers need to doubt and suspend their faulty beliefs in order to build a healthier network of beliefs. Neither Baumgaertner nor Nguyen explicitly say that all members of echo chambers are blameworthy for their bad epistemic practices, but by suggesting individualistic solutions both accounts imply that echo chambers are bad, bad in part because members are blameworthy for what they believe. Members of echo chambers commit epistemic vices.

However, it is too quick to conclude that all members of echo chambers are blameworthy for their bad epistemic practices. We need to distinguish different cases of being part of echo chambers. Nguyen (2020) separates two kinds of membership in an echo chamber: active and passive membership. In the former case, one is intentionally a part of an echo chamber. Whereas, in the latter case, one might be raised in an echo

<sup>2</sup>Even though there is a growing number of voices that challenge the received view (see especially Kelly (2008), Singer *et al.* (2019), Baumgaertner and Justwan (2022), Dorst (2022) for a discussion on the social and political processes that lead to polarization), focusing on the individual bad epistemic practices (e.g., epistemic overconfidence) is still a standard story in explaining and tackling polarization (Dorst 2022). Many thanks to the anonymous reviewer for pointing out the relevant literature.

chamber without being able to identify the echo chamber. Nguyen claims that active members of echo chambers are blameworthy for their bad epistemic practices, but passive members might be blameless:

...actively entering an echo chamber seems epistemically blameworthy in many circumstances. For agents in full possession of a wide range of informational sources, to abandon most of them and place their trust in an echo chamber for, say, an increased sense of comfort and security, is surely some form of epistemic vice. (Nguyen 2020: 25)

The main difference between active and passive membership is that, unlike passive members, active members *intentionally* exercise epistemic vices such as laziness, carelessness, and ignoring the contrary evidence. This is what makes active members blameworthy. I agree with Nguyen on the moral responsibility status of passive members. I think motives and reasons play a key role in ascribing moral responsibility. In the lack of intention to be a part of an echo chamber, it is not fair to find passive members guilty of their bad epistemic practices. Yet, I disagree with Nguyen in the case of active membership. I think it is sometimes reasonable for members of echo chambers to perform bad epistemic practices when they intentionally *choose* to be a part of echo chambers. In the rest of this paper, I argue that friendship might provide strong reasons for an epistemic agent to choose to participate in echo chambers and therefore the members of echo chambers might not be as blameworthy as the received view takes them to be. To flesh out this argument fully, first I need to explain what kind of friendship I have in mind. To that end, I turn to one plausible account in the ethics of belief literature: Sarah Stroud's (2006) account of friendship.

### 3. Friendship

According to one prominent view of friendship, friendship involves epistemic partiality<sup>3</sup> (Annis 1987; Blum 1980; Stocker 1976, 1981; Stroud 2006). Michael Stocker (1976) emphasizes the special motives and emotions friendship involves (Stroud 2006: 502). Building on Stocker's account, Sarah Stroud claims that it is part of the very nature of friendship that it "imposes special demands on our actions" (2006: 502). These demands include charitably interpreting our friends' actions, giving more credence to our friends, being loyal to our friends, etc. (Stroud 2006). When friendship and epistemic ideals clash, Stroud (2006) argues that we have strong reasons to suspend our epistemic ideals and be epistemically partial towards our friends. We can summarize the main thrust of her argument as follows:

Friendship is indispensable for a good life. We all aim for a good life. So, our aim for a good life entails friendship. Intuitively we tend to give more credence to our friends' actions and talk and we charitably interpret their allegedly bad behaviors, and this tendency leads us to gloss over certain evidence. According to the mainstream epistemological theories we should form our beliefs only based on good evidence and justification. But friendship sometimes requires us to ignore or

<sup>3</sup>This view goes by the name "friendship critique." It is raised as a critique of mainstream ethical theories such as consequentialism and deontology (Stocker 1976; cf. Helm 2021). Helm (2021) provides an extensive list of literature on this debate.

reinterpret certain evidence. So, sometimes friendship and epistemic ideals clash. If friendship and epistemic ideals clash we have strong reasons to choose friendship over epistemic ideals. So, we have strong reasons to choose friendship over epistemic ideals (Stroud 2006: 499–503)

A detailed analysis of this argument is not required for my purposes. But the support is fairly clear and intuitive. A good life requires friendship, and friendship sometimes requires epistemic partiality (e.g., charitably interpreting our friends' actions as opposed to strangers, giving more credence to our friends). Consider an example from Stroud's discussion:

...story you were told about your friend Sam. Others who heard that story might conclude, "that certainly was insensitive" (or even sadistic) or "what an inconsiderate jerk" (or womanizer) or "I think he does it deliberately – the little devil positively enjoys breaking people's hearts." As a good friend, however, your conclusions will likely differ. As a good friend, you will tend to file this incident – and Sam's behavior generally – under other labels. Your reaction to this story might be, for instance, "There's never any artifice with Sam. You know where you stand with him: if he doesn't want to see you, he makes that clear. There's no false politeness, no pussyfooting, no hypocrisy, no stringing you along – Sam's too genuine for any of that." In a similar vein, what other people might classify as compulsive womanizing on Sam's part, you might see as irrepressible but fickle enthusiasm and appetite for female charm in all its many varieties. (Stroud 2006: 508)

From different parties' points of view, Sam's actions are interpreted differently. Sam's friends see his actions as perfectly normal, even laudable, while the affected parties might label the same actions as harassment. The upshot of this kind of case is that in our daily life, we as epistemic agents are not living up to the ideals of main epistemological theories. For instance, sometimes we do not search for firm evidence and justification when we are interpreting the actions of our friends. Stroud's account explains why we stop being epistemically virtuous in the case of friendship and concludes: "If satisfying a certain set of demands or ideals would preclude friendship, it follows that we all have very strong reasons not to live up to those demands or ideals." We need friends; therefore it is sometimes permissible to choose friendship over being epistemically virtuous.

One important point is that Stroud does not claim that we *should* choose friendship when epistemic ideals and friendship clash. Rather, she claims that we have *strong reasons* to choose friendship over epistemic ideals. However, I think this has a normative import. If one has strong reasons to choose friendship over epistemic ideals, then one is sometimes permissible to do so. I will qualify this claim in the next section after exploring the role of friendship in the formation of echo chambers and its implications for moral responsibility.

#### 4. Echo chambers and friendship

Returning to echo chambers, I have two aims in this section: 1. to show that echo chambers usually involve friendship; 2. to argue that sometimes friendships give us strong

reasons not to live up to epistemic demands or ideals even when the friendships are formed in echo chambers.

Echo chambers usually involve friendship. This is fairly intuitive. It would be too strong and likely be false to claim that all echo chambers involve friendship. Think about some online communities on Reddit. The users on some harmful subreddits such as /incel interact by sharing memes that target certain groups of people (in this case, especially women). The interaction between members of groups is mostly through memes. Since most of the users do not share their actual identity, no one knows who the posters truly are. In this kind of case, it is hard to specify whether the members qualify as friends. Granted that not all echo chambers involve friendship, nevertheless, I think a weaker claim holds: Many echo chambers involve friendship.

But before going any further, I need to answer the following question: What is friendship? Stroud's account does not help define the boundaries of friendship. But the vast literature on friendship centers around the following conditions: mutual care, intimacy, shared activity, and trust (Helm 2021). The status of necessity for each condition is contested.<sup>4</sup> However, we can arrive at an operative definition of friendship following Bennett Helm's description:

...the intimacy of friendship should be understood partly in terms of the friends forming a "plural agent": a group of people who have joint cares – a joint evaluative perspective – which he analyzes primarily in terms of a pattern of interpersonally connected emotions, desires, judgments, and (shared) actions. Friendships emerge [...] when the friends form a plural agent that cares positively about their relationship, and the variety of kinds of friendships there can be, including friendships of pleasure, utility, and virtue, are to be understood in terms of the particular way in which they jointly understand their relationship to be something they care about – as tennis buddies or as life partners, for example. (Helm 2008; cf. Helm 2021)

According to Helm's description, friends have a similar interpreting viewpoint of worldly affairs; share joint actions such as playing tennis; give more credence to each other than to strangers; and invest emotionally in the relationship. Each of these aspects is satisfied in the echo chambers that involve friendships. Consider the case from the movie *Goodbye Lenin*. Alex's mother wakes up from a long coma and she is in a physically bad condition. Alex and his mother live in East Germany, but the wall has already been demolished. Alex's mother hates West Germany, so if she learns that the wall is destroyed she might suffer from a fatal shock. So to protect his mother Alex must fuel the hatred towards West Germany while hiding the truth about the wall. Even though his mother starts to observe some signs of the 'truth', she reinterprets them according to Alex's story.

Consider a real-life example: CrossFit. The members of CrossFit communities share a joint athletic recreational activity. The members discuss the functioning of muscles and the body in general. They share dietary programs and advise and support each other. In "How We Gather" Casper ter Kuile describes communities like CrossFit and SoulCycle as "spaces traditionally meant for exercise have become the locations of shared, transformative experience."<sup>5</sup> What makes some CrossFit and SoulCycle

<sup>4</sup>See Helm (2021) for an extensive summary of the debate.

<sup>5</sup>How CrossFit Acts Like a Religion – The Atlantic.

groups echo chambers is that once the group identity is established, the outsiders (e.g., people who do not exercise) appear to be “less” human. Once the individuals are bonded with the ties of friendships, the commitments of friendships follow. This aspect of friendship is succinctly described by Stroud as the following:

...our friendships function as commitments. To be someone’s friend is to have cast your lot in with his and, indeed, with his good character; and this properly affects how you respond to new situations and new data. Your friend need not prove each day, from scratch, that he is a good person: friendship is not contingent on being continually renewed by objective proofs of that proposition. A commitment to your friend’s merits is more something you bring to the various situations which confront you than something you take away from the information you receive. This is reflected in our epistemic partiality toward our friends. (Stroud 2006: 512)

Jamieson and Cappella, in a similar vein, claim that members of echo chambers form “community bonds” and cultivate a group identity, they share a “sense of belonging” and become loyal to the group (Jamieson and Cappella 2008: 179–80). This suggests that echo chambers are suitable places where friendships are cultivated. The members spend an immense amount of time together, they share joint activities, they trust each other, and emotionally invest in the group.

Sometimes friendships give us strong reasons not to live up to epistemic demands or ideals even when the friendships are formed in echo chambers. This is also straightforward. Once we accept both Stroud’s claim that friendships involve epistemic partiality and the above claim that echo chambers usually involve friendship, it follows that friendship gives us strong reasons not to live up to epistemic demands or ideals even when the friendships are formed in echo chambers. The argument runs as follows:

- (A1) Echo chambers usually involve friendship (the weak claim).
- (A2) Friendship demands partiality.
- (A3) If Sarah Stroud is right, then we have strong reasons to choose friendship over our epistemic ideals.
- (C1) So, assuming Sarah Stroud is right, when epistemic ideals and echo chambers that involve friendships clash, we have strong reasons to choose echo chambers over epistemic ideals.
- (A4) When we have strong reasons to choose echo chambers over epistemic ideals, it is sometimes permissible to do so.
- (C2) So, when epistemic ideals and echo chambers that involve friendships clash, it is sometimes permissible to choose echo chambers over epistemic ideals.

I defended (A1) above by way of examples. I cannot undertake an exhaustive list of echo chambers but appealing to the strong intuition here would serve my purposes. The intuition is that cults, fitness communities, political audiences, hooligan groups, etc., that qualify as echo chambers are likely to involve friendships. For (A2), I appealed Stroud’s account. I find this account plausible, and for my purposes, I do not need to defend Stroud’s account against its attackers.

One might object that the jump from (A3) to (C1) is not warranted. According to this objection, there might be an imprecise threshold for which epistemic partiality demanded by friendship could be allowed. In other words, the harmful sociological



effect of choosing to participate in an echo chamber might outweigh the benefit an epistemic agent gets from friendship. Individuals search for a good life, and to that end, they end up committing to echo chambers because of the friendships they entertain. But echo chambers are harmful to social life. If the social harm of participating in an echo chamber offsets the benefits of having a friendship, one should choose epistemic ideals rather than friendship.

I do not think this objection threatens the argument I presented. Regardless of the strength of this objection, here one should note that my claim is not that people *should always* choose echo chambers over epistemic ideals when echo chambers involve friendships. I only suggest that when epistemic ideals and echo chambers clash, people have strong reasons to choose to participate in echo chambers. Borrowing Regina Rini's (2017) phrase in her discussion on fake news, I claim that it is *individually reasonable* for epistemic agents to actively participate in echo chambers. Accordingly, to clarify the normative force of this argument, I added a further claim (5) that these strong reasons make it sometimes permissible to engage in bad epistemic practices. It is *sometimes* permissible because, as stated in the above objection, the harmful effects of participating in echo chambers might outweigh the benefits of friendship, in those cases individuals would still be blameworthy for their active participation in echo chambers.

My discussion here runs parallel to Regina Rini's (2017) discussion. Building her argument on recent epistemology of testimony literature, she writes that "shared partisan affiliation encourages testimony recipients to grant more credibility to testifiers than would otherwise be warranted" (Rini 2017). So, according to Rini, it is individually reasonable for epistemic agents to give credibility to fellow partisans and distribute false information via their social media accounts. That is why Rini suggests that to eliminate the transmission of fake news, we need to focus on institutional change rather than individual bad epistemic. I agree with Rini that it is reasonable to expect individual epistemic agents to share fake news content. Similarly, I claim that it is individually reasonable for the members of echo chambers to continue their activities in the echo chambers when those echo chambers involve friendships.

For similar reasons, both Thomas Kelly (2008) and Kevin Dorst (2022) claim that belief polarization is rooted not in irrational epistemic behavior such as not responding to the evidence but in selective scrutiny and self-doubt – which are perfectly rational practices. As Dorst (2022) writes:

For me, predictable polarization tends to induce this sort of double-vision. I find myself unsurprised ("Of course you believe that"), but at the same time baffled ("How can you believe that?") Unsurprised, because I know the psychology: peopleglom onto the beliefs of their peers, confirm and entrench those beliefs, become extremely confident, and so on. Baffled, because I often find that they're not just conforming, or pigheaded, or dogmatic. Yet if they aren't, how do they end up where they do? (Dorst 2022)

According to Dorst, people end up adopting distorted beliefs due to a process not different than the adoption of healthier beliefs. Each individual with their own limited cognitive resources adopts a stance and "spend their time trying to explain away problems with it" (Dorst 2022). Agreeing with this picture, I would add that aiming for a good life plays an important role in adopting that stance in the first place.

Similar to Dorst, Baumgaertner and Justwan (2022) recently claimed that individuals in echo chambers exert what they called a "preference for belief." They observe that "in



the absence of defeaters, individuals tend to (and are warranted/justified to) believe what someone in their epistemic community invites them to believe.” This tendency, they claim, makes the echo chambers resilient to individualistic interventions such as promoting open-mindedness. So they suggest that to prevent polarization more investigation needs to be done on the initial formation of the beliefs in a given echo chamber.<sup>6</sup> To me, this highlights the importance of the link between echo chambers and friendship. Baumgaertner and Justwan (2022) do not question why individuals have the tendency to believe what their peers say in epistemic communities. Individuals might have this tendency partly because they entertain friendships in echo chambers which gives them strong reasons to be epistemically partial.

Now, if we accept the conclusion (C2), this leaves us with the following puzzle: Either (i) there is a ground on which we might consider the members of echo chambers less blameworthy or (ii) we should reject Stroud’s account of friendship. One crucial point here is that although Stroud’s account is crucial to my argument, I do not need to defend it against any objections. This is because my argument might as well work as a conditional. If one agrees that Stroud’s account is plausible, then friendships in echo chambers render the members less blameworthy.

## 5. Should we eliminate echo chambers? How?

Many start their discussion on echo chambers by characterizing the phenomenon and end it with suggested ways of elimination. As mentioned in Section 2, the trodden path leads to individualistic solutions. For instance, the members of echo chambers need to suspend their faulty beliefs and start over (Nguyen 2018, 2020) or learn to become more impartial (Baumgaertner 2014). However, given that the members of echo chambers have strong reasons to be part of echo chambers I believe these suggestions are misleading. In this section, I gesture my suggestion for the problem echo chambers cause.

But before that, it should be noted that it is not obvious that echo chambers are *always* bad. Jamieson and Cappella (2008: 244) claim that some echo chambers “[arm] their members effectively” and thus are conducive to active political engagement. Thus not all effects of echo chambers are negative. Having said that, the harmful effects of echo chambers, I believe, require an institutionalist solution. Consider the following discussion of Rini’s on fake news:

That is, individual people typically act reasonably when they grant greater credibility to fellow partisans, even if this sometimes leads to the acquisition of false beliefs. This normative analysis generates a further claim about the remedy for fake news: it will not be solved by focusing on individual epistemic virtue. Rather, we must treat fake news as a tragedy of the epistemic commons, and its solution as a coordination problem. Fake news exploits otherwise reasonable practices of information transmission. Ending it will require institutional change. (Rini 2017)

Rini suggests that institutions need to implement clear norms that would regulate communication on social media. According to Rini, if the institutions make how

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<sup>6</sup>It should be noted here that Baumgaertner’s (2014) initial individualistic position shifted from individualistic solutions (e.g., exercising impartiality) to collective solutions. Many thanks to the anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to my attention.

the norms work clear, then more and more users would be mindful of the relevant social norms governing the platform. Consequently, the users would be more cautious about their mistakes and the tweets they retweet. So eventually clear norms would mitigate the current dissemination of content related to fake news. In the case of echo chambers, my discussion leaves us with a similar result to Rini's: Granted that the echo chambers constitute a sociological threat, the solution requires an institutional change. As mentioned briefly in the first section, both Baumgeartner (2014) and Nguyen (2020) suggest individualistic solutions to prevent the formation of echo chambers. But taking the argument from friendship seriously gives us the following result: focusing on individual epistemic virtues is not helpful in cases where echo chambers involve friendships. The force of this consequence, of course, depends on the frequency of friendship-infused echo chambers. Clearly, statistical evidence requires an in-depth analysis of all echo chambers, which I am not able to provide within the limits of this paper. However, based on the prevalence of the examples in the previous section, I strongly believe that most echo chambers involve friendship.

To sum up, when epistemically virtuous practices weigh more than epistemically vicious practices in a given echo chamber, the formation of an echo chamber might result in sociologically positive effects. Yet, there are still some echo chambers that are bad. If I am correct in pointing out the futility of focusing on individual epistemic vices, then the solution to the problem of those echo chambers calls for institutional change.

In this respect, Neil Levy's (2021) discussion on epistemically polluted environments is especially helpful. Epistemic pollution, Levy claims, occurs when the marks of true expert knowledge do not suffice to distinguish it from fraudulent experts, and so the faulty beliefs proliferate. The marks: *credentials* (e.g., having a PhD, publishing peer-reviewed research), *track records* (a record of making predictions), *argumentative capacity*, and *agreement with the consensus* (other experts recognize the truth of the research) (Levy 2021: 117–22). Yet, Levy claims that these marks are not mimic-proof. For instance, diploma mills and predatory journals can easily generate "solid" credentials. Considering the ineffectiveness of individualist solutions (e.g., practicing critical thinking, open-mindedness, epistemic humility) against epistemic pollution, Levy (2021: 125–31) suggests several courses of collective action that center on restoring trust in the scientific institutions: reducing the number of predatory journals, cutting the funding for researchers publishing in illegitimate journals, reducing the media pressure on the content of publications.

Once we take the link between friendship and echo chambers into account, since the individuals are less blameworthy for their faulty beliefs, the greater extent of moral responsibility would be on the institutions. Both Levy's and Rini's suggestions would be effective for an institutional change, but I doubt that they would be sufficient. More ink needs to be spilled over the sorts of interventions required in tackling the pressing case of echo chambers. Although, I am not able to suggest policy proposals, by undermining the received view's epistemic vice narrative, the argument from friendship supplements the recent voices that raise concerns over individualistic solutions.

## 6. Objections

In this section, I consider three objections to my project. The first one considers the plausibility of Stroud's account; the second one points out the qualitative difference

between friendships cultivated in and out of the echo chambers; and the third one raises a thought experiment to challenge the implications of my argument.

The argument from friendship runs on the plausibility of Stroud's view. One might reject Stroud's account altogether and claim that the argument does not take off the ground. This is correct. I concede that the argument needs Stroud's view to work. But I do not think this objection engages with the argument itself. The force of the argument is still there. This objection can be evaded by taking the conclusion as a conditional – as mentioned briefly in Section 4. Granted that many echo chambers involve friendship, *if* friendship involves epistemic partiality, *then* the members of echo chambers have strong reasons to choose to participate in echo chambers over epistemic demands or ideals. This move thereby implies that rejecting the antecedent only amounts to deciding not to engage with the argument.

One might object by saying that friendships formed in echo chambers are qualitatively different from the friendships cultivated outside the echo chambers. The former involves cases of friendships that we should avoid at all costs. I do not believe this is true simply because I cannot think of any qualitative difference between, say, a friendship cultivated in a CrossFit community and an academic community (assuming the former is a case of an echo chamber while the latter is not). In both cases, agents might support each other; form long-lasting bonds; exercise the practices of reciprocal love and respect; share a joint activity; and build trust and intimacy. One might still object by pointing out that Rush Limbaugh was not a “friend” to his audiences. To this, I would say yes. The parties who deceptively benefit from the formation of echo chambers do not need to be friends with the members of the echo chambers. It is enough for my account to work if one entertains friendships with other members of the echo chambers. The only relevant point is that echo chambers might be places where individuals cultivate friendships.

One might point out the counterintuitive results of the argument from friendship as the following: Assuming that the Nazi soldiers were part of an echo chamber and that they were friends with one another, the argument suggests that these members were not blameworthy for their faulty beliefs (e.g., genocidal beliefs). Furthermore, it is individually reasonable for these members to actively participate in the echo chamber. This result challenges our intuition that the extreme beliefs of some individuals (e.g., Nazi soldiers) are blameworthy, and regardless of the friendships cultivated in echo chambers, these individuals should be held morally responsible for their faulty beliefs. Considering this objection, I think there are at least two possible routes to take. First, the Nazi soldier case might not be among the cases that are permissible in the scope of the argument from friendship. One reason for this might be that the harm of the genocidal beliefs outweighs any kind of friendship duties. So the argument remains intact. Second, even if we grant that it is permissible in the scope of the argument, the force of this objection disperses once we give proper weight to the extent of moral responsibility. Due to friendship, the individual members of the group have strong reasons to participate in the echo chamber and this implies that they are not as blameworthy as is suggested by the received view. Since the individual members bear less moral responsibility than the received view claims, the individualist solutions are misleading. The friendship aspect of echo chambers stressed in this paper adds to the importance of the social networks in which the beliefs are formed. As the growing number of dissenting voices suggests, greater care needs to be exerted on institutional change (Baumgaertner and Justwan 2022; Levy 2021).

## 7. Conclusion

Are the members of echo chambers blameworthy for their beliefs? If we follow Stroud's account of friendship, we end up with the following conclusion: if echo chambers involve friendship, then the epistemic agents have strong reasons not to live up to epistemic demands or ideals when the friendships are formed in the echo chambers they are members of. This result stands in striking contrast with the received view, according to which the members of echo chambers are blameworthy for their epistemic vices and faulty beliefs. The received view uses individual epistemic vices to propose individualistic solutions for the problem of echo chambers. I argued that this does not work. Simply because the members of echo chambers thereby have strong reasons to participate in the echo chambers. And the individuals are thereby not that blameworthy due to the friendships cultivated in the echo chambers. That is why I also argued that focusing on individual epistemic vices is not helpful in the case of echo chambers. The argument I sketched here undermines the narrative of the received view that suggests individualistic solutions and thereby aims to contribute to the growing number of dissenting voices.

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**Alper Güngör** The author completed his MA (2022) in Philosophy at Bogazici University. Currently, pursuing his PhD degree (2022-) at McGill University. The author's country of origin is Turkey. Email: [alper.gungor@mail.mcgill.ca](mailto:alper.gungor@mail.mcgill.ca)

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