Two Democratic Hopes

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Robert Westbrook claims that pragmatist political theorists share a
common hope for democracy. I argue that there are at least two
distinct and opposed pragmatist conceptions of democracy – one
Deweyan, the other Peircean – and thus two distinct and opposed
hopes for democracy. The author criticizes the Deweyan view and
defends the Peircean view.

In his new book, *Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Truth*,
Robert Westbrook provides a compelling account of the state of play in
pragmatist political theory.[1] On the whole, I find his analyses and narrative
agreeable. However, Westbrook's discussion provides occasion to draw
attention to an important and growing schism within contemporary pragmatist
political theory. Although Westbrook writes as if there is a single, though
variously expressed, democratic hope that pragmatists adopt, I see at least *two*
separate and opposed democratic hopes that claim to be pragmatist in origin.
These two democratic hopes derive respectively from the two different
pragmatisms of John Dewey and Charles Peirce.[2]

To be sure, Deweyan democracy has been the dominant paradigm among
pragmatists for thinking about politics. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that
among the so-called "classical" pragmatists, Dewey devoted thousands of pages
to topics in political philosophy, whereas James wrote precious little and Peirce
wrote nothing.[3] However, Peircean pragmatists have developed resources within
Peirce's thought for theorizing about a variety of topics that Peirce himself did
not address, including democracy.

I begin by posing a dilemma that confronts Deweyan democracy. I shall
then argue that the Peircean approach to democracy that Cheryl Misak and I
have proposed avoids this dilemma.[4] If, as I allege, this dilemma represents a
serious difficulty for Deweyans, and if Peircean democracy succeeds in
avoiding it, then there is a significant difference between the "epistemic
justification for democracy" deployed by Peirceans like Misak (195) and the
Deweyan commitment to a participatory democracy grounded in a substantive
moral ideal (230). This difference, I contend, marks a significant *divide* between
Deweyan and Peircean democracy.[5] This divide entails that there is not a *single*
pragmatist democratic hope. There is instead a Peircean hope and a Deweyan

hope. I find myself on the side of the Peircean hope, and I oppose the Deweyan one. I am not sure where Westbrook stands, and would like to hear more.

1. A Dilemma for Deweyan Democracy[6]

We may characterize Deweyan democracy, at least in a preliminary way, in terms of the contrast between *substantive* and *procedural* theories of democracy. To make sense of this contrast, consider Schumpeter's famous definition of democracy as "that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for people's vote." (1950, 250) On Schumpeter's view, democracy is strictly *procedural*. Embodying no particular *normative* vision for society beyond that of efficient and limited government, it consists simply in procedures of political decision.

Given its procedural orientation, Schumpeter's view also implies a position regarding what we might call the *scope* of democracy. If democracy is simply a procedure by which elites compete for political office, then democracy is focused exclusively on the *state*. Hence, on Schumpeter's view, democracy is maximally *narrow* in scope; it is, we may say, *statist*.

The Deweyan view, by contrast, holds that democracy is not simply a procedure for deciding who shall hold political office; it is instead a "way of life" (LW11: 217; LW13: 155) that manifests a substantive "moral" (LW7: 349) and "social" (LW2: 325) ideal, a commitment to the "liberation of the potentialities of members of the group in harmony with the interests and good which are common" (LW2:327).[7] On the Deweyan view, Democracy's home, then, is not the voting booth or the jury box or the floor of congress; rather, democracy resides "in the attitudes which human beings display to one another in all the incidents and relations of daily life" (LW14:226). In short, Deweyans see democracy as *moral* "through and through: in its foundations, its methods, its ends" (LW13:173); they identify democracy with the *moral* aspiration of a political order in which each "feels [the community's] success as his success, and its failure as his failure" (MW9:18). In fact, Dewey associates democracy with "the one, ultimate, ethical ideal of humanity" (EW1:248).

Because of its substantive nature, Deweyan democracy also rejects the *statist* orientation of Schumpeter's view. Since on the Deweyan view democracy is a moral ideal in its own right, "the idea of democracy is a wider and fuller idea than can be exemplified in the state even at its best" (LW2: 325). As it is a "mode of associated living" (MW9:43) and the "idea of community life itself" (LW2: 328), Deweyan democracy has a *broad* scope. For Deweyans, democracy is *deep*; that is, they take democracy as a moral ideal that extends down into "all modes of human association," including "the family, the school, industry, religion" (LW2: 325).

Now let us turn to the dilemma. Much of contemporary political philosophy is motivated by the problem set for substantive theories of democracy by

what John Rawls calls "reasonable pluralism" (1996, 36). Reasonable pluralism is the view according to which there are *several* substantive moral visions of the human good that are consistent both with liberal-democratic politics and with the best employment of moral reasoning, but are nonetheless inconsistent with each other.[8]

If we concede that reasonable pluralism obtains, and accept the fundamental liberal insight that the political order must justify itself to those living under its authority, the problem for Deweyan democracy is clear. Under conditions of reasonable pluralism, any conception of democracy that is tied directly to a specific substantive moral ideal is oppressive, since it attempts to enlist the coercive power of the state in the task of realizing a set of values which reasonable citizens could reject.[9]

The problem is worsened by the fact that Deweyan democracy is not only *substantive* but *deep*. Deweyans do not attempt only to enlist the institutions of the state in service of their reasonably contestable moral ideals; they call for *all* institutions of social association to follow suit.[10] But, again, if reasonable pluralism obtains, then the values constitutive of Deweyan democracy comprise but one reasonable moral vision of society and the human good. To recommend that the whole of society be reconstructed to manifest and cultivate Deweyan democratic values is to reject the pluralism among reasonable citizens that lies at the heart of modern democracy. Again, this is oppressive.

Thus the dilemma: Deweyans must either relinquish the aspiration to reconstruct society in the image of their substantive moral commitments, or they must deny reasonable pluralism. Taking the first horn of the dilemma is tantamount to relinquishing that which is distinctive about Dewey's democratic theory. Taking the second horn makes Deweyan democracy an aggressive and hegemonic form of communitarianism. Neither seems very promising.

More importantly, it is important to note that, in any case, Deweyan democracy is not particularly *deliberative*. If Deweyan democracy is shorn of its substantive elements, the result is a politics no more deliberative than the anemic Rawlsian image of a polity conducting its political discourses in the manner of Supreme Court justices (Rawls 1996, 254). Alternatively, if Deweyan democracy is *constituted* by a substantive moral vision that it imposes on all modes of association, then it ultimately leaves nothing to deliberate about, because all questions concerning the fundamental nature of our institutions and the values they should instantiate will have been settled in advance by Deweyan social architects.

2. Why Peircean Democracy is Different

Peircean democracy avoids this dilemma. By offering a vision of democracy that is *epistemic* rather than *moral*, the Peircean promotes a democratic theory that is substantive and deep, but nonetheless not hostile to reasonable pluralism. To see

this, consider the core of Peirce's epistemology, which can be summarized by means of the following commitments:

> 1. To believe that *p* is to hold that *p* is true.[11]

> 2. To hold that *p* is true is to hold that *p* "is a belief that cannot be improved upon, a belief that would forever meet the challenges of reason, argument, and evidence" (Misak 2000, 49).

> 3. To hold that a belief would meet such challenges is to commit to the project of *justifying* one's belief, what Peirce called "inquiry."

> 4. The project of squaring one's beliefs with reasons and evidence is an ongoing *social* endeavor that requires participation in a "community of inquiry."

The Peircean-epistemic argument for democracy follows intuitively from these principles: one should endorse a democratic political order because only in a democracy can one live up to one's epistemic commitments. That is, if being a believer commits one to the project of justification, and if the project of justification commits one to the social enterprise of examining, exchanging, testing, and challenging reasons, then one can satisfy one's commitments *qua* believer only within a political context in which it is possible to be an inquirer. Inquiry requires that characteristically democratic norms obtain; in order to inquire, there must be norms of equality, free speech, a freedom of information, open debate, protected dissent, access to decision-making institutions, and so on. Moreover, since the project of justification involves testing one's beliefs against the broadest possible pool of reasons, experiences, and considerations, inquiry requires norms of the sort often associated with "radical democracy" views, such as participation, inclusion, and recognition.[12]

Additionally, the Peircean argument carries a number of institutional entailments. If inquiry is to commence, the formal infrastructure of democracy must be in place, including a constitution, courts, accountable bodies of representation, regular elections, and a free press. Also, there must be a system of public schooling designed to equip students in the epistemic habits necessary for inquiry, and institutions of distributive justice to eliminate as far as justice allows the material obstructions to democratic citizenship. Further, democracy *might* also require more extensive provisions, such as special measures to preserve public spaces and to create forums for citizens to encounter new perspectives.[13]

Insofar as it draws its conception of democracy from a view of what it is to believe and inquire *properly*, we can say that Peircean democracy is *substantive*. Furthermore, in light of its institutional and social implications, we can say that Peircean democracy is *broad* in scope. In these respects, Peircean

democracy might seem very closely allied with Deweyan democracy. However, there is a crucial difference. Whereas on the Deweyan view the democratic social order is justified in terms of an overarching moral ideal, the Peircean view relies upon no substantive *moral* vision. The Peircean justifies democratic institutions and norms strictly in terms of a set of *epistemic* commitments. It says that *no matter what one believes* about the good life, the nature of the self, the meaning of human existence, or the value of community, one has reason to support a robust democratic political order of the sort described above simply in virtue of the fact that one has beliefs at all.

Because we Peirceans refuse to build within our conception of democracy a doctrine about "the one, ultimate, ethical ideal of humanity" (EW1:248), we can, with Rawls and others, acknowledge the fact of reasonable pluralism. That is, we can recognize that there are many distinct and epistemically responsible moral visions that are compatible with democratic politics. Accordingly, we understand that questions of how our schools should be organized, what our communities should look like, and what constitutes good citizenship are *not* questions that can be settled by appealing to democratic theory as such; they are instead questions to be pursued experimentally and discursively *within* a democratic politics. This means that, on the Peircean view, a democratic polity that adopts after due democratic deliberation a set of policies that are considerably more modest than those which Deweyan democracy would recommend is *not* ipso facto suffering a democracy deficit. What counts for Peirceans is not the proximity of a given democratic outcome to a substantive moral vision of the ideal society, but rather whether the outcome is the result of properly democratic processes of reason exchange.

By drawing upon decidedly *epistemic* commitments, the Peircean view does not invite the dilemma between substance and pluralism occasioned by Deweyan democracy. The Peircean pragmatist does not propose a moral ideal for all of society, but rather an analysis of proper *epistemic* practice. The Peircean then recommends a political order in which disputes between conflicting moral visions can be conducted in an epistemically responsible way. Hence the Peircean pragmatist offers a far more modest politics than the Deweyan. Whereas Dewey thought that getting democracy right meant getting the whole of moral philosophy right, the Peircean leaves open the dialectical space for substantive disagreements about deep moral and social questions within democracy. In this way, Peircean democracy is substantive and deep, but not hostile to the pluralism of substantive moral doctrines. Moreover, it is also genuinely *deliberative*; it provides an epistemically normative vision of democratic politics that does not predetermine the answers to deep and substantive moral disputes.

Someone might object to the distinction I have invoked between moral and epistemic commitments. The objection runs that just as Deweyans expect everyone to converge upon a common substantive moral vision, Peirceans expect everyone to adopt a single (pragmatist) epistemology. The objection continues that Peircean epistemology is at least as controversial as any moral

philosophy; and so both the Deweyan and the Peircean views commit the same error of denying reasonable pluralism. Deweyan democracy denies it at the level of moral commitments, and Peircean democracy denies it at the level of epistemic commitments.

This objection is mistaken, but instructive. The epistemic commitments that lie at the core of Peircean democracy do not constitute a comprehensive epistemology in their own right, but rather state a set of principles that are consistent with any well-developed epistemology. That is, internalists, externalists, foundationalists, coherentists, and so on all agree that beliefs aim at truth, that when we believe, we take ourselves to be responding to reasons, argument, and evidence, and that reasons, argument, and evidence are *at the very least* reliable indicators of truth. Accordingly, the four Peircean commitments identified above represent an attempt to make explicit the epistemology that is implicit in our existing epistemic practice. They attempt to capture the norms we countenance in virtue of the very fact that we are believers. Hence, if they succeed in capturing those norms, the Peircean commitments are not *optional*. Moreover, insofar as contestation itself presupposes norms of reason-responsiveness and truth-aiming, the Peircean commitments – provided, again, that they adequately capture our epistemic norms – are non-contestable, because contestation itself presupposes them.

This is not to say that the particular articulations of the four epistemic principles above are beyond revision or once-and-for-all fixed. As they represent an attempt to capture the norms implicit in our everyday epistemic practice, they may require significant revision and refinement in light of new experience and further reflection upon our practice. But the very processes of *revision* and *refinement* presuppose the core idea that our beliefs must be responsive to argument and evidence. In this way, we retain the core of Peircean fallibilism: everything is in principle revisable, but not at the same time. We may refine our understanding of any particular epistemic norm only by implicitly accepting the others, however provisionally.

Peirceans and Deweyans are therefore *not* in the same boat. The substantive moral ideal that drives the Deweyan program is, indeed, reasonably rejectable; hence Deweyan democracy runs afoul of pluralism. The Peircean epistemic commitments, by contrast, are robust enough to support a case for democratic politics, but are nonetheless modest enough to recognize the legitimacy of deep disputes over fundamental moral ideas. Hence the Peircean offers a substantive and deep conception of democracy that is consistent with a due appreciation of reasonable pluralism.

3. Could there be a Synthesis?

Westbrook does not acknowledge this crucial respect in which Deweyans and Peirceans differ in their vision of democratic politics. In fact, Westbrook refers to a "shared hope" among Peirceans and Deweyans. He writes:

> It was Dewey's hope, as it is the hope of neopragmatists including Hilary Putman, Cheryl Misak, and Cornel West, that Americans would deliberate ... not only as citizens but as pragmatists.... They would come to meetings believing that their debates were "truth apt" in a "low-profile" sort of way.... (239)

If the argument of the previous section succeeds, Deweyans and Peirceans do *not* share a common hope for democracy. I think Westbrook is correct to say that it is a characteristically *Deweyan* hope that all democratic citizens come to participate politically as (Deweyan) pragmatists. But, as I have already indicated, such a hope is unrealistic. I do not claim to speak for neopragmatists like Putnam or West, but I contend that there is no such hope among Peirceans such as Misak and myself. Despite Westbrook's description, we do not *hope* that citizens will believe that their political claims are "truth-apt," and we do not *hope* that citizens will understand truth as a "low-profile" matter of disquotation. Instead, we begin from the fact that citizens *do* take their political beliefs to be truth apt, and then offer an analysis of truth that is robust enough to capture its normative force while being philosophically modest enough to leave deep philosophical controversies about the nature of truth to the side.[14] Our sole hope is that democratic politics will proceed in a way that is increasingly epistemically responsible.

This Peircean hope recognizes that proper democracy can take many forms, and that many positions across the political spectrum can be held and defended in epistemically responsible ways. Accordingly, the Peircean hope is not essentially a hope for a more progressive or left-leaning set of policies, but a hope that, in the future, our policy decisions – *whatever they may be* – will be driven more by reasons, arguments, and evidence, and less by rhetoric, money, and power. The Deweyan hope, by contrast, is far more ambitious. Deweyan democracy proposes a comprehensive moral ideal, and it aspires to remake, to "reconstruct," the social world in its image. Under contemporary conditions of pluralism, the Deweyan hope for a democratic politics based in a shared faith in a moral ideal is not only naïve, but politically pernicious.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, parenthetical citations refer to Westbrook 2005.

2. See Mounce 1997 for a detailed exposition of the claim that Dewey and Peirce represent not two different articulations of pragmatism, but two distinct versions of pragmatism. Richard Rorty apparently agrees with Mounce on the "two pragmatisms" thesis; he laments the "tendency to overpraise Peirce," claiming that "[Peirce's] contributions to pragmatism was merely to have given it a name, and to have stimulated James" (1982, 160f.). According to Rorty, Peirce was, among other things, "still attached to the notion of representation" (1990, 3), and so James and Dewey are, in his view, the true pragmatists.

3. Perhaps "thousands" is an understatement? John Stuhr claims that "all of Dewey's philosophy ... simply *is* social and political philosophy" (1998, 85).

4. See Misak 2000; Misak 2004; Talisse 2004; and Talisse 2005.

5. Stuhr implicitly acknowledges the divide. He recognizes that Deweyan democracy is essentially a kind of moral faith that rejects the idea of an "epistemological justification" of democracy as "philosophically misguided" (2003, 58f.). I accept Stuhr's description of the divide, but obviously come down on the opposite side.

6. The argument of this section draws from Talisse 2003.

7. References to *The Collected Works of John Dewey* are given as follows: *The Early Works* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967–1971); *The Middle Works* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976–1983); and *The Later Works* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981–1990) are indicated by EW, MW, or LW followed by volume and page numbers.

8. Compare Chantal Mouffe, "the specificity of modern democracy lies in the recognition and the legitimation of conflict and the refusal to suppress it through the imposition of an authoritarian order" (2000, 113).

9. Hence Rawls takes the fact of reasonable pluralism to entail "the fact of oppression," according to which "a continuing shared understanding on one comprehensive religious, philosophical, or moral doctrine can be maintained only by the oppressive use of state power" (1996, 37). This leads Rawls to argue that a "well-ordered democratic society" *cannot* be a community in the Deweyan sense (1996, 41f.).

10. Recall that the Deweyan aim is to extend democracy to "all modes of human association" (LW2: 325).

11. See Wiggins 1998 and Haack 1998, 8.

12. For an account of how these commitments can be read off of Peirce's argument in "The Fixation of Belief," see Talisse 2004.

13. I am thinking here of the kind of view that Cass Sunstein's has devised (1996; 2001, 2003), and also of the proposal developed in Ackerman and Fishkin 2004. The Peircean holds that whether democracy does, in fact, require such measures is something about which we must inquire.

14. That is, in my view, Peircean pragmatists need not be *militant* disquotationalists; we do not insist that there is nothing more to truth than the Tarski biconditionals. Instead, we hold that the T-schema and the intuition that a true belief would forever survive potential defeaters are *adequacy conditions* for *any* conception of truth. So Peirceans indeed offer a "low-profile" conception of truth, but not because we necessarily oppose any higher-profile view, but instead because we contend that the low-profile version is sufficient to explain the intuitive internal connections between believing (or asserting), experience, evidence, and reasons. We leave deeper philosophical questions about the nature of truth to the side, not because we deny that such questions are worth asking, but because such questions are questions for *philosophers* to grapple with. We contend that any viable philosophical theory of truth will satisfy the adequacy conditions captured in the Peircean view; thus we hold that the disputes among truth theorists are beside the point for an epistemic view of democracy.

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