

Abstract

This brief paper is a précis of my book, *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy* (Routledge, 2007), which is the subject of a symposium in this issue of *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*.

Keywords: Democracy, Pragmatism, Pluralism, Truth, Peirce, Dewey

I am honored to have my book, *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy*, be the subject of a symposium in *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*. Many of the core ideas developed in the book have their origin in papers I originally published in *Transactions*. That is to say, for many years I benefited greatly from Peter Hare's unflagging and generous support of new voices in American Philosophy. Peter had a special taste for philosophical controversy, and expressed to me on several occasions the worry that work in the American tradition had become too congenial, insulated, and placid; he told me that he liked my work not because he agreed with any of my views, but simply because I seemed to be saying things that were *disruptive*. I am not sure that he meant this as a compliment, but I took it as such. The idea of publishing this symposium in *Transactions* was his, and the details for the symposium were settled the day before he passed away. What a loss.

This symposium grows out of two *Author Meets Critics* sessions. The first was organized by Brendan Hogan for the 2008 Pacific Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association in Pasadena. The Pasadena participants were Rosa Mayorga, Melvin Rogers, and Mark Van Hollebeke. The second was organized by Thom Brooks for the 2008 *Political Studies Association*

Precis of A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy

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meeting in Swansea, Wales. The UK participants were Brooks, Matthew Festenstein, and Cillian McBride. Peter had the splendid idea of adding Colin Koopman to the symposium.

I thank the participants for their contributions this symposium. I also thank Thom Brooks and Brendan Hogan for organizing the conference sessions, and Cornelis De Waal at *Transactions* for handling the editorial details. Again, it is a great honor to have my work examined in this journal.

A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy is a polemical book. It arose out of a frustration with much of the current work in the genre that I call *contemporary classical pragmatism*. Accordingly, although the main argument of the book has to do with democratic theory, it proceeds against the backdrop of a more general argument regarding the insular and self-congratulatory character of much of the current work in the classical pragmatist idiom. I will not rehearse this argument here, but will say more about it in the responses to my critics.

The main argument of *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy* proceeds in two stages, one destructive and the other constructive. The destructive stage is aimed specifically at Deweyan democracy, the dominant model of pragmatist political theory. I then develop a constructive case in favor of a view I call *Peircean democracy*. The main thesis of the book is that pragmatists who want to theorize democracy must abandon Deweyan democracy and take up Peircean democracy. This is a bold thesis. In order to see that it is true, we must introduce considerations drawn from the broader field of political philosophy.

In the early 1990s, John Rawls saw a problem for liberal democratic theory that no one had seen before: The very liberties secured by a liberal democratic society inevitably generate a *reasonable pluralism* of what Rawls called “comprehensive doctrines” (2005, 4).¹ When we consider this in light of the fundamental liberal idea that the coercive power of the state is legitimate only when it is exercised in accordance with principles that are *justifiable to all*, we confront a serious problem: No conception of liberal democracy that is officially wedded to a comprehensive doctrine—even a fully liberal doctrine—could serve as our shared public conception of politics. Hence Rawls argued that all traditional varieties of liberal democratic theory—from Locke, Kant, and Mill to his own view in *A Theory of Justice*—were self-defeating. They are visions of a liberal society that are oppressive. They are oppressive because they would permit political coercion on the basis of reasons that citizens could reasonably reject.

Take Mill’s view in *On Liberty*. Mill’s liberalism presupposes the Greatest Happiness Principle as the “ultimate appeal on all ethical questions” (1991, 15). For Mill, our liberties derive from the utility calculus; accordingly, to show that some policy is happiness maximizing is, according to Mill, to succeed in justifying that policy.²

Yet some reasonable people—for example, Kantians, or pragmatists for that matter—deny that the Greatest Happiness Principle is the “ultimate appeal” on ethical questions. Thus, to enact a policy on strictly utilitarian grounds is to coerce some on the basis of reasons they reasonably reject. This is oppressive.

One need not accept Rawls’s solution to this problem—his “political not metaphysical” liberalism—to appreciate its force. In fact, it can be posed without reference to Rawls. Yet it cuts to the very heart of any version of the liberal democratic enterprise that seeks to ground a public conception of politics in a comprehensive doctrine. Deweyan democracy is this kind of view.

Famously, Dewey proposed that democracy should be understood not merely as a kind of state (LW2: 325), but as a “way of life” (LW13: 155), a moral ideal aimed at securing the “growth” of all individuals (MW12: 181) and helping all to attain a “truly human way of living” (LW11: 218).³ As he saw the self as inherently social (LW7: 227; MW12: 187), he rejected any firm or sharp distinction between public and private; accordingly, he saw the moral ideal of democracy as fit to organize “all modes of human association, the family, the school, industry, religion” (LW2: 325). He saw democracy as the project of “making our own politics, industry, education, our culture generally, a servant in an evolving manifestation of democratic ideals” (LW13: 197). And Dewey’s conception of those ideals is inextricably bound up with his broader philosophy: his Darwinian conception of experience, his naturalist theory of value, his instrumentalist epistemology and constructivist ontology, and so on. As Steven Fesmire correctly observes, Dewey’s philosophy forms an “organic unity” (2003, 70).

Dewey envisioned a society whose “political, economic, international, educational, scientific, artistic, and religious” (LW13: 186) institutions were organized around his philosophical commitments. Therefore Deweyan democracy presupposes a community of citizens more or less united around a shared comprehensive doctrine of Deweyan pragmatism, “a comprehensive account of experience, inquiry, logic, education, morality, religion, and art” (Stuhr 1998, 85). The problem is that Deweyan pragmatism can be reasonably rejected, and in fact is. One can reject Dewey’s “comprehensive account” without thereby revoking one’s fitness for citizenship in a liberal democracy. Since the entire architecture of Deweyan democracy is premised on Dewey’s conception of a “truly human way of living” (LW11: 218), the Deweyan democratic ideal is a brand of “civic totalism” (Macedo 2000, 139) and is therefore oppressive, for it would allow coercion on the basis of reasons that citizens could reasonably reject. Hence we must reject Deweyan democracy.

The constructive argument develops a pragmatist conception of democracy rooted in a Peircean social epistemology that is consistent with the fact of reasonable pluralism. I argue that “The Fixation of

Belief” is best read as an argument about the epistemic norms implicit in our epistemic practices: We are *already committed* to what Peirce called the scientific method of inquiry because it alone is consistent with the norms we adopt simply as epistemic agents, as believers. Importantly, the scientific method can be practiced only under specifically *democratic* social conditions. Proper inquiry can commence only under conditions in which agents enjoy the standard liberal democratic freedoms, entitlements, and protections (free speech, liberty of conscience, protected dissent, freedom of the press, access to information, and so on). Thus only in a democracy can we live up to the norms we are committed to simply in virtue of the fact that we have beliefs at all. Only in a democracy can we be epistemically responsible believers.

The norms associated with proper inquiry are irreducibly *social*. As proper inquiry requires the exchange of reasons, evidence, and argument, one can be an epistemically responsible agent only among other responsible epistemic agents. So the Peircean conception of democracy contends that the state must take steps to cultivate among citizens the epistemic character traits requisite for participation in a community of inquiry. Consequently, Peircean democracy is *epistemically perfectionist*—it says that the state must promote a certain kind of good, namely, *epistemic responsibility*.

But aren't the epistemic norms reasonably rejectable? They are not. There is no fact of *reasonable* pluralism regarding our most fundamental epistemic norms because the very concept of *reasonableness* is parasitic on those very norms. A principle is *reasonably* rejectable when its rejection does not entail the violation of the fundamental norms governing the assertion and exchange of reasons and arguments. Since the Peircean norms are constitutive of reason-giving, they cannot be reasonably rejected.

If the constructive argument succeeds, I will have shown that one version of pragmatism can supply what the Rawlsian says is impossible, namely, a substantive conception of liberal democracy that is consistent with the fact of reasonable pluralism. If it does not, pragmatists had better start working on another kind of reply to the Rawlsian arguments, or else face the troubling result that pragmatism is unable to provide a viable political philosophy.

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NOTES

1. I cite the 2005 edition of Rawls's *Political Liberalism*. The book was originally published in 1993.
2. Note that Mill holds that "Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians" (1991, 14–15); this is because "Liberty . . . has no application to any state of things anterior to the time when mankind have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion" (1991, 15).
3. References to Dewey's work will follow the standard convention for citing the 37 volume *Collected Works*.

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