



Nordic
Studies in
Pragmatism

Helsinki | 2010

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“Peirce and Pragmatist Democratic Theory”

In: Bergman, M., Paavola, S., Pietarinen, A.-V., & Rydenfelt, H. (Eds.) (2010). *Ideas in Action: Proceedings of the Applying Peirce Conference* (pp. 105–116). Nordic Studies in Pragmatism 1. Helsinki: Nordic Pragmatism Network.


ISSN-L 1799-3954

ISSN 1799-3954

ISBN 978-952-67497-0-9

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Nordic Pragmatism Network,
Helsinki 2010

www.nordprag.org

Peirce and Pragmatist Democratic Theory

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1. Introduction

The revival of pragmatism has brought renewed enthusiasm for John Dewey's conception of democracy as a "way of life".¹ In this paper, I shall present a case for thinking that there is a decidedly Peircean brand of pragmatist democratic theory which is superior to Deweyan democracy. The argument proceeds in three steps. First I sketch the basic contours of Deweyan democracy. Then I argue that later Rawlsian insights concerning the fact of reasonable pluralism render the Deweyan model of "democracy as a way of life" unacceptable as an ideal for contemporary democratic societies. Finally, I sketch a view of democracy based in Peirce's social epistemology and argue that it is not vulnerable to the later Rawlsian arguments which undermine the Deweyan view.

One result of this paper is that pragmatists who want to theorize democracy must abandon Dewey. Another is that there is a non-Deweyan option available to the pragmatist. Of course, this is not sufficient in itself to demonstrate that pragmatists who theorize democracy must adopt the Peircean view I shall sketch; another non-Deweyan but self-avowedly pragmatist view of democracy has been proposed, namely, Richard Posner's "everyday pragmatist" (Rawls, 2003, p. 50) view of democracy. According to Posner, democracy is best understood as a "competitive power

¹ It is increasingly difficult to pick up a work of mainstream contemporary democratic theory that does not make at least a passing positive reference to Dewey. See, for example, Nussbaum (2007), Bohman (2007), Dworkin (2006), Sandel (2005), Stout (2004), MacGilvray (2004), Richardson (2002), Sunstein (2001), Shapiro (2001), Young (2000).

struggle among members of a political elite... for the electoral support of the masses" (2003, p. 130). Though I cannot argue the point here, Posner's view is vulnerable to serious objections and is in any case not really a *pragmatist* option at all.² If this is correct, then it is safe to conclude that, if the arguments in this paper go through, pragmatists who want to theorize democracy must be Peirceans.

2. What Deweyan democracy is

The core of Deweyan democracy can be stated as follows. Deweyan democracy is *substantive* rather than proceduralist, *communicative* rather than aggregative, and *deep* rather than statist. I shall take these contrasts in order. Deweyan democracy is *substantive* insofar as it rejects any attempt to separate politics and deeper normative concerns. More precisely, Dewey held that the democratic political order is essentially a *moral* order, and, further, he held that democratic participation is an essential constituent of the good life and a necessary constituent for a "truly human way of living" (LW 11:218).³ Of course, democratic theorists differ over the question of what democratic participation consists in. Dewey rejects the idea that it consists simply in processes of voting, campaigning, canvassing, lobbying, and petitioning in service of one's individual preferences; that is, Dewey held democratic participation is essentially *communicative*, it consists in the willingness of citizens to engage in activity by which they may "convince and be convinced by reason" (MW 10:404) and come to realize "values prized in common" (LW 13:71).⁴ Importantly, Dewey thought that such communicative processes were fit to direct not simply the basic structure of government, but the whole of social association. In fact, Dewey held famously that democracy is a "way of life" (LW 13:155) rather than a kind of state or a collection of political institutions (LW 2:325). On Dewey's view, democracy is a mode of social organization that "must affect all modes of human association, the family, the school, industry, religion" (LW 2:325).

² I argue against Posner in Talisse (2005) and Talisse (2007, ch. 5).

³ Standard references to John Dewey's work are to the critical edition, *The Collected Works of John Dewey*, with the following abbreviations: EW = Early Works, MW = Middle Works, LW = Later Works. See the bibliography. Cf. Campbell, "Participation in a community is essential to a fulfilled human existence because such participation makes possible a more diversified and enriching experience for all members" (1998, 24). See also Campbell (2005) and Saito (2006).

⁴ According to Dewey, the "heart and guarantee of democracy is in free gatherings of neighbors on the street corner to discuss back and forth what is read in uncensored news of the day" (LW 14:227).

In this way, Deweyan democracy is *deep*. It is meant to reach into and affect the whole of our lives, both individual and collective; it provides a social ideal of human flourishing or the good life, what Dewey called “growth” (MW 12:181).

Deweyan democracy is therefore a species of *perfectionism*. As he sees the self as inherently social, and the good as a matter of self-realization, Dewey held that “Democracy and the one, ultimate, ethical ideal of humanity are [...] synonyms” (EW 1:248).⁵ However, unlike other forms of perfectionism, which hold that the project of forming citizens’ dispositions is a task only or primarily for the state, Dewey’s perfectionism is, like his conception of democracy, *deep*; that is, on the Deweyan view, the perfectionist project of realizing human flourishing is a task for *all* modes of social association (LW 2:325). Consequently, Dewey held that “The struggle for democracy has to be maintained on as many fronts as culture has aspects: political, economic, international, educational, scientific and artistic, and religious” (LW 13:186). He saw the task of democracy to be that of “making our own politics, industry, education, our culture generally, a servant and an evolving manifestation of democratic ideals” (LW 13:197). For Dewey, then, *all* social associations should be aimed at the realization of his distinctive vision of human flourishing.

3. An objection to Deweyan democracy

John Rawls’s idea of the “fact of reasonable pluralism” (Rawls, 1996, p. 36) is at this point so well known among political theorists that it does not require extended comment. Basically the idea is this: There is no single comprehensive philosophical, religious, or moral doctrine upon which reason, even at its best, converges. That is to say, there is a set of defensible and reasonable comprehensive moral ideals such that each ideal is fully consistent with the best exercise of reason but inconsistent with other members of the set. Consequently, despite “our conscious attempt to reason with each other” (1996, p. 55), agreement at the level of fundamental moral, religious and philosophical issues is elusive. Importantly, Rawls contends

⁵ On the social self, Dewey holds that “The idea that individuals are born separate and isolated and are brought into society only through some artificial device is a pure myth”; he continues, “No one is born except in dependence on others... The human being is an individual because of and in relation to others” (LW 7:227). Dewey also holds that “society and individuals are correlative, organic, to one another” (MW 12:187). Contemporary Deweyan democrats maintain this commitment (see Boisvert, 1998, pp. 54f.; Green, 1999, p. 6; Stuhr, 1998, p. 85; Fesmire, 2003, p. 11; Colapietro, 2006, p. 25).

that reasonable pluralism “is not a mere historical condition that may soon pass away” (1996, p. 36), but “the long-run outcome of the work of human reason under enduring free institutions” (1996, p. 129). The very liberties secured in a constitutional democracy give rise to reasonable pluralism.

The fact of reasonable pluralism entails the corresponding “fact of oppression” (1996, p. 36). If reasonable pluralism is “the inevitable outcome of free human reason,” then “a continuing shared understanding on one comprehensive religious, philosophical, or moral doctrine can be maintained only by the oppressive use of state power” (1996, p. 36). To simplify: Where minds are free, pluralism prevails; where pluralism does not prevail, minds are not free.

When the facts of reasonable pluralism and oppression are considered in light of the core democratic commitment – which we shall call the Legitimacy Principle – that the exercise of coercive political power is legitimate only if it is justifiable, at least in principle, “to every last individual” (Waldron, 1993, p. 37), the result is that any political order which is premised upon the truth of a single comprehensive doctrine – even a perfectly reasonable and democratic one – is oppressive. It is oppressive because it coerces reasonable citizens in the service of a comprehensive moral, philosophical, or religious ideal that they could reasonably reject. Accordingly, Rawls draws the radical conclusion that “no comprehensive doctrine is appropriate as a political conception for a constitutional regime” (1996, p. 135). Therefore, if by “community” we mean “a special kind of association, one united by a comprehensive doctrine,” a “well-ordered democratic society” cannot be a community (1996, p. 40).

However, it is clear that Deweyan democracy is committed to the claim that proper democracy is a community in this Rawlsian sense. That is, Deweyan democrats envision a political world in which “all modes of human association” (LW 2:325) are organized around Dewey’s comprehensive moral doctrine. As Dewey’s comprehensive doctrine is a species of perfectionism, he naturally sees democracy as an ongoing, and never completed, project of cooperatively and experimentally realizing his view of human flourishing.⁶ Accordingly, Deweyan democrats see proper democracy as a matter not simply of how a society or group makes its collective decisions, but rather of *what it decides*. The Deweyan thought is that, in a proper democracy, collective decision should increasingly reflect a social commitment to principles, policies, and institutions that further Deweyan growth;

⁶ Dewey describes human flourishing as a condition in which each individual “feels [the community’s] success as his success, and its failure as his failure” (MW 9:18).

consequently, the degree to which a given society is *not* directed towards the realization of Deweyan flourishing is the degree to which that society is failing at democracy.

This point deserves emphasis. To repeat: The Deweyan view is that human association of any kind is properly – that is, *democratically* – organized only when it are directed towards the realization of “growth” as understood by Dewey. Accordingly, any association that seems to *not* be so directed is failing at democracy. Consequently, whether a given mode of social association is democratic is, according to the Deweyan, a matter of *what policies it enacts* rather than *how it makes its collective decisions*. This perhaps explains why the literature on Deweyan democracy is so laden with institutional and personal prescriptions which, in many cases, curiously take the form of *commands*.

An exhaustive examination of the Deweyan democracy literature cannot be attempted here, so I will limit myself to only a few Dewey scholars. Describing Deweyan democracy as “the culture of a whole society in which experience is engaged in its power of fulfillment of life through cooperation and communication,” Thomas Alexander claims that “*if democracy is to have a future, it must embrace an understanding of the deepest needs of human beings and the means of fulfilling them*” (1998, p. 17, my emphasis). John Stuhr claims that Deweyan democracy presents a “demand” for “different personal conduct and far-reaching cultural reconstruction – deep changes in habits of thought and action, patterns of association and interaction, and personal and public values” (2003, p. 55). Stuhr concludes that “we must each seek to expand democracy [...]. We must realize in thought and action that democracy is a personal way of individual life [...], and we must rededicate our lives to its realization – now” (2003, p. 64). Finally, James Goulinlock describes Deweyan democracy as a “more or less specific ordering of personal dispositions and modes of conduct that would be operative in all forms of interpersonal experience”; he continues that “Political democracy, *when it is real*, is but an instance of this more generic form of life” (1999, p. 235; my emphasis).

The problem with all of this is that the commitments constitutive of the Deweyan democratic ideal – which for these theorists comprise the *sine qua non* of democracy itself – can be reasonably rejected. Insofar as the Deweyan democrat seeks to reconstruct the whole of society in the image of her own philosophical commitments, she seeks to create social and political institutions that are explicitly designed to cultivate norms and realize civic ideals that her fellow citizens could (and in fact do) reasonably

reject. Hence Deweyan democracy is an ideal that must deny the fact of reasonable pluralism; it must deny that non-Deweyans could be reasonable. For this reason Deweyan democracy is oppressive in Rawls's sense. Accordingly, Deweyan democracy is an inappropriate ideal for contemporary democratic societies.

In response, Deweyans might appeal to the hackneyed injunction to dismiss "problems of philosophers" and attend only to the "problems of men" (MW 10:46); they will claim that the concept of reasonable pluralism is an artifice of a philosophical approach that is not properly attuned to real-life conditions, and conclude from this that the objection I have raised cuts no ice.

But the fact of reasonable pluralism is a markedly evident aspect of modern life. One finds in newspapers and magazines, on television programs, on blogs and list-servs, and in the public square proponents of reasonable moral and political views that differ fundamentally from, and are opposed to, the commitments that are presupposed by Deweyan democracy. Moreover, all of the most pressing moral and political controversies of the day feature a plurality of reasonable positions formulated in terms of a wide variety of reasonable moral doctrines. With regard to any persistent moral dilemma, one can find compelling arguments on *many* sides of the issue. To dismiss the fact of reasonable pluralism is to retreat from our actual experience of our social and political world.

To put the matter somewhat differently, Deweyans hold that it is a *necessary* condition for a social order's being properly democratic that all of its institutions, policies, and norms aim at promoting growth. And yet many democratic citizens reject the idea that "growth itself is the only moral 'end' " (MW 12:81). In fact, many hold that growth is not even a coherent moral idea. Consequently, many would reject the idea that, in order to be democratic, all of society must aim at promoting growth. Of course, Deweyans regard such citizens as mistaken, perhaps in the grip of an obsolete moral view. And maybe the Deweyans are correct in their assessment. But the question is not about the correctness of Dewey's moral philosophy. Rather, the question is whether any reasonably rejectable moral doctrine, such as Dewey's, should be publically authoritative in a society of equals who are reasonably morally divided. The answer is clearly no. A community or government violates the equality of citizens when it coerces them on the basis of a moral doctrine that they can reasonably reject. And this is precisely what the Deweyan ideal prescribes. Far from being a solution to democracy's ills, Deweyan democracy exacerbates them.

Since Deweyans are committed to the idea that the worth of a philosophical view is to be judged according to the depth of its connection with real-life problems and conditions, I take the argument that Deweyan democracy cannot countenance the fact of reasonable pluralism to be especially damaging. The upshot of the argument I have deployed is that Deweyan democracy fails *on its own terms*; it must reject a salient trait of current experience. Consequently, we should bid farewell to Deweyan democracy. Pragmatists who want to theorize democracy must look elsewhere.

4. A Peircean alternative

The very idea of a Peircean conception of democracy may seem strained. Yet, as I have argued elsewhere at length (Talisse, 2003; 2007), Peirce's essay on "The Fixation of Belief" can be read as ultimately promoting a social epistemology according to which norms of proper inquiry entail democratic political norms. To see this, consider the core of Peirce's epistemology, which can be summarized as follows:

1. To believe that p is to hold that p is true.⁷
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, p. 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".

An epistemic argument for democracy follows intuitively from these components: 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

⁷ Cf. Wiggins, (1998); Haack, (1998, p. 8).

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 more radically democratic norms, such as participation, inclusion, and recognition.

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 possible material obstructions to democratic citizenship. In addition, democracy might also require special provisions for the preservation of public spaces, the creation of forums for citizen deliberation, and the like.⁸

Insofar as it begins from a view of what it is to believe and inquire *properly*, we can say that Peircean democracy is *substantive*. Furthermore, as it sees democratic politics as involving social processes of reason-exchanging, Peircean democracy is *communicative*. Given that it endorses social institutions that aim to enable proper inquiry among citizens, we can say that Peircean democracy is *deep*.

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 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 substantive *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 holds beliefs.

Since the Peircean conception of democracy does not contain a doctrine about "the one, ultimate, ethical ideal of humanity" (EW 1:248), it can duly acknowledge the fact of reasonable pluralism. Peircean democrats can recognize that there are many distinct and epistemically responsible moral vi-

⁸ I'm thinking here of the kinds of policies endorsed by Cass Sunstein to ensure deliberation among persons of different opinions (see Sunstein, 1996; 2001; 2003; Ackerman and Fishkin, 2004).

sions that are compatible with democratic politics. Accordingly, Peirceans understand that questions of how our schools, workplaces, and churches 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. 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 avoids 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.

Someone might object to the distinction I have invoked between moral and epistemic commitments. The objection has it 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. 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. Internalists, externalists, foundationalists, coherentists, and so on all agree that beliefs aim at truth, and that when we believe, we take ourselves to be responding to reasons, argument, and evidence. Accordingly, the four Peircean commitments identified above represent an attempt to make explicit the epistemology that

is implicit in our existing epistemic practice. They are the commitments we have in virtue of the very fact that we are believers; they are not *optional*. Furthermore, since contestation itself presupposes norms of reason-responsiveness and truth-aiming, the Peircean commitments are not reasonably contestable.

5. Conclusion

If the argument of the above section succeeds, Peirceans and Deweyans are *not* in the same boat. The substantive moral ideal that drives the Deweyan program is, indeed, reasonably rejectable; hence Deweyan democracy would permit coercion on the basis of a reasonably rejectable moral ideal and thus 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 can offer what the Deweyan cannot, namely, a substantive conception of democracy that is consistent with a due appreciation of the reasonable pluralism of comprehensive moral ideals. But that is not all. The Peircean view does more than simply accommodate reasonable pluralism. Importantly, the Peircean view also makes available to pragmatist democratic theorists a kind of reason that can be offered in support of the progressive agenda typically favored by pragmatists which does not presuppose a controversial moral ideal. To be specific, the Peircean can offer *epistemological* reasons to support more aggressive policies of distributive justice, or fundamental reforms of the news media which need not appeal to “growth,” but only to the prerequisites of proper epistemic activity. For unlike “growth,” the ideal of promoting epistemic responsibility amongst a population of democratic citizens is not reasonably rejectable.

I indicated at the beginning of this paper that there is reason to think that other purportedly pragmatist conceptions of democracy are nonviable. Consequently, pragmatists who want to theorize democracy should be Peirceans.

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