"Pragmatic Democracy: Inquiry, Objectivity, and Experience"[i]

1. Introduction

Many Americans express pride that they live in a "democracy." But pride is not enough to sustain a democracy and there continue to be very good reasons to see the status of democracy as uncertain. As political philosopher Ronald Beiner describes our situation,

> [W]e find ourselves barbarized by an empty public culture, intimidated by colossal bureaucracies, numbed into passivity by the absence of opportunities for meaningful deliberation, inflated by absurd habits of consumption, deflated by the Leviathans that surround us, and stripped of dignity by a way of living that far exceeds a human scale. (Beiner, 1992, 34)[ii]

Even if we bracket Beiner's compelling concerns, it remains true that democracy is hard to maintain. As a form of political and cultural organization, democracy must be constantly reinvented since it is of the very nature and essence of democracy to be something which *cannot* be handed on from one person or one generation to another. "Every generation," John Dewey writes,

> has to accomplish democracy over again for itself; that its very nature, its essence, is something that cannot be handed on from one person or one generation to another, but has to be worked out in terms of needs, problems and conditions of the social life of which, as the years go by, we are a part, a social life that is changing with extreme rapidity from year to year. (LW13:299)[iii]

Much of my work on Dewey has focused on the epistemic and metaphysical aspects of his view of experience. And while I am not a political philosopher, my inquiries into Deweyan experience have lead increasingly toward Dewey's democratic theory, especially in order to ask how well it really works when applied to areas such as politics. Provoking my recent skepticism is Robert Talisse's *Democracy After Liberalism: Pragmatism and Deliberative Politics* and *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy*.[iv] In *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy*, which I reviewed in 2008,[v] Talisse criticized Dewey's democratic theory for being, in effect, what Rawls called a "comprehensive view" By making sufficiently grandiose metaphysical assumptions (about the good life and "experience") Dewey's view becomes, Talisse argued, "reasonably rejectable" by any who could provide good arguments against it. The upshot is that any who insist that Dewey's view actually be implemented would be open to the charge of oppressing at least some in society—those who reasonably reject Dewey's characterizations of the good life and experience. This fact, namely that Dewey had formulated a democratic theory with potential and predictable anti-democratic results, shows why Dewey's proposal for democracy is, as stated, unacceptable. In lieu, Talisse proposed a metaphysically leaner model based upon Peirce.

My review did its best to defend Dewey, but the effort felt incomplete. Here, instead of rearguing my case, I intend to embrace the skepticism Talisse has provoked and trace out several threads. First, I briefly explain what I believe is "epistemic" in Dewey's vision of democracy, particularly how his approach utilizes experiential and communal inquiry to produce what I call "pragmatic objectivity." Second, I show how "pragmatic objectivity" provides an alternative to absolutism and self-interested relativism by appealing to certain norms of empirical experimentation—for example, that conditions and procedures be *avowed* and *transparent*. The balance achieved by

pragmatic objectivity is connected back to democratic ways of life. Third, I raise the question of how pragmatic objectivity can be justified, seeking to show how it is underwritten by Dewey's conception of experience—specifically by "primary" or "everyday" experience. Fourth, I try to make some trouble for experience, partly with (a) Talisse's "radical pluralism" objections, and partly by questioning Dewey's contention that primary experience is (b) "ineffable" and (c) able to provide a "check" on theory. Finally, I conclude by admitting that I cannot see how Deweyan experience solves—argumentatively--the problem of radical pluralism but try, in a hopeful vein, to show why some of Dewey's suggestions regarding consensus-building *without* argument may yet provide movement forward.

Democracy as Epistemic

To understand the sense in which Dewey's vision of democracy is epistemic, let's begin with a problem.

> Your young daughter is being bullied by boys at school. After talking with teachers and the boys' parents about the situation, it is clear that you and your daughter are the only ones who think a serious wrong is being perpetrated. The others are simply dismissing the problem with various explanations. In essence, they amount to this: "boys will be boys."

Anyone with a child would be frustrated by the answer "boys will be boys." This response, after all, seems "objective" insofar as it refrains from blaming specific people or circumstances and only refers impersonally to the some abstract and unchangeable nature of boys. But if we wish to get behind this answer—to see why it obfuscates and, so, is a bad kind of answer—we need to see how it is generated by the kind of objectivity that is pragmatically *undemocratic*.

Typically, "democracy" is identified with political machinery—universal suffrage, recurring elections, political accountability the electorate, trial by peers, etc. But mechanisms alone do not express the soul of democracy, which Dewey argues is "wider and fuller." Deweyan democracy is comprised of two complementary parts. There is the *normative*: the basis in *community* of laws, customs, and institutions. The second is *epistemic*: the collaborative process of *inquiry* with which a democracy can identify, prioritize, and solve problems. Taken together, these parts comprise "democracy" in its fullest sense—as *a way of life* or "mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (MW9:93). Let us examine both parts of democracy, starting with community.

Community

No problem is ever encountered, evaluated, or resolved in a vacuum. An event is *taken as* a "problem" whenever established habits—existing preferences and values—are interrupted. A problem only exists *from a perspective someone actually inhabits*. Personal perspectives are neither static nor atomic: they arise, reside, and evolve for individuals-within-communities. Communities can provide the conditions for individual flourishing which, in turn, can revitalize communities.[vi] It is in fact *because* communities are the sites of value creation and conservation that the techniques and bureaucratic structures of democratic government are of subordinate importance. The "great contribution of American life to the world's history," Dewey writes, is its "subordination of the state to the [free and self-governing] community" (LW5:193).

Clearly, when group values conflict—or when a group's aims contravene guiding documents such as a nationally-ratified Constitution—appealing to the "objective function" of government is indispensable. But the to read such an appeal to "objectivity" as an appeal for *complete*

neutrality constitutes, in my view, an absurd interpretation. It is not possible to fully divorce *means* (e.g. policies and laws) from *ends* (e.g. community values); moreover, an attempt to govern from an impossible pretense of neutrality seems more likely to do harm than good because it tends to (1) create clumsy and morally obtuse policies (based as they are upon a fanciful notion of objectivity) and (2) alienate government employees who would *like* to be compassionate but are compelled—for reasons of political correctness, not sound reasoning—to operate from an abstractly neutral basis with which they cannot even explain! A more constructive construal of "objectivity" as "pragmatic objectivity" is available, and I will expand on this in a moment.

Inquiry

In addition to community's provision of democracy's normative background, there is the second constituent of democratic life, its epistemic basis in inquiry. I understand *inquiry* to include the epistemic acts taken by individuals and communities to solve problems and improve conditions. Four aspects of pragmatic inquiry are paramount. First, inquiry is *dynamic*: inquiry is a process of problem solving involving feeling, observation, analysis, hypothesis, and experimental action. Second, inquiry's results are fundamentally *provisional*; in other words, any results achieved by inquiry (which may be codified as "laws," "principles," etc.) should be understood to be "reliable" or "warranted" but never absolutely "true." Third, to be an effective method, inquiry must be *self-correcting*. Since its purpose is to serve evolving creatures in a changing environment, specific techniques and assumptions of any inquiry must remain open to correction, modification, or deletion. Finally, inquiry is *social*, involving collaboration and communication among people self-conscious of the fact that they are collaboratively engaged in trying to navigate a problem together. People banded together in such a way constitute a *public*.[vii]

A genuine democracy depends on the enactment of inquiry with these four aspects and, as a consequence, prefers as *better* certain epistemic practices over other ones. It prefers certain *methods* of problem solving (empirical, experimental) over others (blind loyalty, dogmatic assertion); it prefers certain ways of *communicating* (active listening, creative dialogue, genuine debate) over others (patronizing monologues, repetitious propaganda); it prefers certain attitudes (future oriented innovation) over others (retrospection, mere conservation of custom). If we keep these four aspects of pragmatic inquiry in mind—along with the associated preferences (for attitude, methods of problem solving and communication)—it becomes easy to understand why free speech, association, and universal education would be "fundamental" to a pragmatist: they are *fundamental to* the *functioning* of democratic inquiry.

As I will discuss later, there is in addition a pragmatist faith that experience binds all of these epistemic preferences together. In part this is a faith that all the resources needed for good choices can be found in our conjoint and communicated experiences; in part it is a faith that people will exhibit both the ability and will to use what is found in such experience to revise aims, methods, and values in light of a future that is arguably better. Such a faith might also be called a "regulative hope," since it helps to regulate our social conduct by affirming the value in engaging with one another despite any certain knowledge about successful outcomes, human nature, or glorious destinies.

Objectivity: Pure, Non-Existent, and Pragmatic

In describing how Deweyan democracy integrates community with inquiry, I have labeled democracy's *communal* basis "normative" and its *inquirential* methods "epistemic." In real life,

of course, such distinctions blur. Communities emphasize the value of their epistemic habits; as they proudly declaim themselves to be "sensible people" and "fair minded," they place a normative stress upon what seem like strictly epistemic values of accuracy and impartiality. In the process, "objectivity" often becomes a trump card used to force opponents into submission, as each side deploys claims to objectivity as argument-stoppers. Such a use of "objectivity" is, from a pragmatic standpoint, unproductive. Moreover, it is rooted in a false dualism which the pragmatist can expose and render powerless.

Deweyan democracy mediates between these various conceptions of objectivity by proposing a better understanding of it. It takes up the tension between those worried about *relativism* (who argue that objectivity should be "pure" and not based on any particular community or interest group), and those worried about *absolutism*, (who suspect that even the word "objectivity" serves to help the status quo continue their domination of those less powerful). The challenge a pragmatist must meet, briefly, is to (a) discover what kind of objectivity can be conducted *and* tested by a plurality of actual communities without yielding contentious and relativistic results. (That is, it is important to discover the kind of objectivity which can satisfy some concerns of absolutists.). The pragmatist must also (b) explicate a conception of "objectivity" which will not serve as validation of the status quo or be suspect for conferring tacit acceptance of mechanisms and rules which have operated in prejudicial and discriminatory ways. (That is, it is important to formulate an objectivity which can satisfy pluralists.)

Dewey moves beyond the dichotomy of absolute objectivity-versus-relativism by mounting a critique of "pure" neutrality or objectivity as *unachievable*. "One can only see," Dewey writes,

"from a certain standpoint, but this fact does not make all standpoints of equal value. A standpoint which is nowhere in particular and from which things are not seen at a special angle is an absurdity." (LW6:14-15). At the same time, he criticizes the radically pluralist notion that perspectives could be *so* discrete that they would have *nothing* substantial in common. For even among the most *disparate* groups, he notes, "the same predicaments of life recur" (MW9:337). This fact—that predicaments recur—offers, he thinks, an empirical baseline useful for forging consensus and inquiry on common challenges.

While those advocating unqualified relativism or absolutism may hold these views on *purely* theoretical grounds, I believe these views are also motivated by practical needs—needs which Deweyan "pragmatic objectivity" can satisfy. If we analyze the living motives of the antagonists, I think we find that *absolutists seek closure*—that is, they are motivated by a practical need to terminate inquiry and take action; we find that *relativists seek inclusion of diverse perspectives*— and this is motivated by both a sense of moral fairness and the epistemic instinct to keep hypotheses imaginative in a way that can lead to the broadest possible corroboration.

Pragmatism's task, then, is to offer a conception of objectivity that does not eliminate perspectives but instead shows how a plurality of perspectives can be managed harmoniously and productively. Such an alternative "pragmatic objectivity" could blunt critics' charges that pragmatism amounts either to (a) a thinly veiled relativism, pushing its own agenda or (b) a view which, by assuming traditional norms of inquiry, thereby permits the status quo to maintain established advantages.

What might be said first about pragmatic objectivity is that its chief concern is the way inquiry operates—its process. Objectivity is not an end-state of inquiry; rather, it is a *virtue* of practice; objectivity is *a regulative ideal* for inquiry. In traditional conceptions of objectivity—say, an "objective account" of a historical event, for example—the intent is to depict what "actually happened." Seeing no way to hit such an experience-transcendent target, the pragmatist translates "objective account" as *the obligation of inquirers to adhere to those regulative habits which make inquiry an effective process*. A pragmatist can accept the traditionalist's search for "what really happened" *if* it is understood within a pragmatic rubric about the habits of inquiry. Taken in this way, a search for "what really happened," Dewey writes,

> is a valuable *methodological* canon [because it is] interpreted as a warning to avoid prejudice, to struggle for the greatest possible amount of objectivity and impartiality, and as an exhortation to exercise caution and skepticism in determining the authenticity of material proposed as potential data. Taken in any other sense, it is meaningless. (LW 12: 236, my emphasis.)

None of Dewey's methodological rules seem unorthodox. What makes them *pragmatic* is that *their value lies in their function* in regulating the *process* of inquiry rather than their contribution to ensuring a correspondence with what is "real." Dewey writes, "To be 'objective' in thinking is to have a certain sort of selective interest operative....One may have affection for a standpoint which gives a rich and ordered landscape rather than for one from which things are seen confusedly and meagerly." (LW6:14-15)

Critics' greatest concern with Dewey's operational-pragmatic account of objectivity is that it is relativistic—fixed by no standards independent of human activity. But if we start from where we are—that is, with our cares and concerns—then this concern can be set aside. The question becomes, instead, on what non-absolute basis can a pragmatist reject and condemn "bias"? A pragmatic-objective answer about bias will be, again, operational. For it is not the mere *presence* of bias but the *kind* of bias being manifested. As Dewey put it, "certain kinds of bias...are obnoxious. Bias for impartiality is as much a bias as is partisan prejudice, though it is a radically different quality of bias." (LW6:14) Distinguishing between kinds of bias or interests as *commendable* or *condemnable* does not need to appeal to standards *external* to experience; such distinctions must instead appeal to practically experienced consequences. We can say, *"This* bias opens up inquiry and makes possible stable, determinate, and satisfactory solutions whereas *that* bias closes inquiry off from wider participation and corroboration, and yields solutions that are short-sighted, unstable, and only idiosyncratically satisfactory." Moreover, even these judgments—the differentiation of biases—can have no fixed standard; they, too, are directed by context, perspective, and goals. This is not relativism, however, because it is part of *our* context, as inheritors of the "democratic experiment," that we value those epistemic norms which lead to reliable judgments.[viii]

Connecting Objectivity with Democracy

Let me to back up a bit and make the connection between democracy and objectivity explicit. *Democracy* is a way of life which empowers communities (and individuals) to express and secure their values by engaging in the epistemic process of social or public inquiry. *Pragmatic objectivity* is a virtue exemplified by inquiries with processes that are accessible, transparent, and amenable to challenge or revision. Democracy and objectivity are *mutually supporting* because

(a) *objectivity* is an epistemic virtue made possible by the conditions of democracy; and, (b) a *democracy* can survive and sustain these conditions only when its citizens seek objectivity in their inquiries (and maintain institutions, like schools, that nurture the prerequisite capacities for inquiry).

With these connections in mind, let us return to our opening example of the young girl bullied by boys. We can see now that the excuse (for bullying) that "boys will be boys" is both undemocratic and not genuinely objective. By citing a truism, defenders are attempting to circumvent inquiry and argument. They appeal to objectivity, but it is the objectivity of a truism: oversimplifying and deceptive, it seeks to block not advance inquiry. Rather than provide genuine (operational or pragmatic) objectivity—via a review of evidence, canvass of viewpoints, test of hypotheses—these anti-democrats merely seek to use force.

Experience and Objectivity

So far I have shown how a non-foundational form of objectivity ("pragmatic objectivity") functions as a regulative ideal for the kind of epistemic inquiry required for any substantive form of democracy. However, I have not said much about what *grounds* pragmatic objectivity. For Dewey, the ground or basis is, of course, experience. More specifically, it is "primary" or "ordinary" or "everyday" experience, which is also the starting point for any empiricism Dewey thinks can be called "serious" or "genuine." Central to such an empiricism is the "method of denotation." Dewey writes,

> The experiential or denotative method tells us that we must go behind the refinements and elaborations of reflective experience to the gross and compulsory things of our doings, enjoyments and sufferings--to the things that

force us to labor, that satisfy needs, that surprise us with beauty, that compel obedience under penalty. (LW1:375-76, my emphasis)

This is a familiar Deweyan imperative. It counsels, "Start with life, don't start with words! Return to experience, not to theory!" A denotative method follows this counsel by remaining alert to observations and parameters which would prefigure or predetermine acceptable outcomes. The method "warns us," Dewey writes, "that all intellectual terms are the products of discrimination and classification," and that "we must, as philosophers, *go back to the primitive situations of life that antecede and generate these reflective interpretations*, so that we re-live former processes of interpretation in a wary manner, with eyes constantly upon the things to which they refer." (LW1:386, my emphasis)

This rehearsal of the facts of Dewey's denotative method is unremarkable; my aim is to emphasize those passages that identify "experience" as the mark of what I wish to call the "pragmatically objective." For, as Peirce pointed out, one cannot reach pragmatic clarity merely by relying upon the methods of tenacity or authority, nor upon the a-priori re-purposing of a handy web of terms and theories. Rather, one must force one's theories to pay regard toward something not already contained or implied by the terms of the theory. To force theories to undergo such tests is to utilize what Dewey calls the "primacy and ultimacy of the material of ordinary experience." Such experience, he says, "*provides a check or test* for the conclusions of philosophic inquiry." (LW1:26, my emphasis). The value of primary experience, then, is its ability to guide theory and give it an "an extra-theoretical check."[ix]

To briefly summarize the connections made so far: Genuine democracy rests upon habits of epistemic inquiry; such inquiry is effective when it strives for pragmatic objectivity; and pragmatic objectivity is itself sought by habits of vigilantly starting from and testing results with ordinary or primary experience. Through this connection, primary experience underwrites democracy.

Interrogating the Denotative Method and Primary Experience

Now, it was abundantly clear to Dewey—and should be for Dewey's admirers today—that the term "experience" does not typically resolve most disputes regarding political theory. As Richard Bernstein points out in his review[x] of Martin Jay's book *Songs of Experience*, both conservative and progressive thinkers have appealed to the way experience funds wisdom, and the resulting debate (over how "experience" itself should be construed and employed) is contentious and ongoing. While it is true that cumulative political experience can inform one's judgment about reigning ideologies, it is also true that we too easily forget that we can become unmindful of the prejudices built into our experience, and so it is important to insist that experience itself be "subjected to rigorous critique." (Bernstein, 2006, 268)

What was *fresh*, Bernstein reminds us, about the pragmatists' use of experience was the fact that their appeals to experience were not merely dialectical. Rather, Bernstein writes, "American pragmatic thinkers...*self-consciously* attempted to develop a new holistic conception of experience" that sought to pay "full justice to the cognitive, scientific, religious, aesthetic, political, and historical dimensions of experience." (Bernstein 270) Dewey, especially, seized

upon experience's dynamic, experimental *and* aesthetic aspects and in so doing, made the pragmatists' instrumental uses of experience *especially* pertinent to democracy. For Dewey,

> Aesthetic experience is not a special genre or realm of experience. The aesthetic dimension is a pervasive quality of experience, and this quality can potentially characterize any experience—including scientific inquiry and practical activity....Dewey emphasizes the political significance of experience and democratizes experience. He brings art and aesthetic experience back to the context of the everyday life of ordinary people...[and] advocates a social and political ideal in which all experience becomes enriched, and funded with emotional and cognitive meaning. Consequently his moral and political ideal is also aesthetic. (Bernstein, 271-72)

Now, I think Bernstein is right about all of this—that the use of "experience" as a bulwark in political arguments is highly susceptible to misuse or abuse; that Dewey's deployment of "experience" is especially compelling when it is pushing toward aestheticizing (i.e. making *meaningful*) the rhythms played out by our everyday lives and institutions. Indeed, much has been written attacking and defending the metaphysical implications of Dewey's use of "experience," and Richard Rorty is the typical fulcrum of many of these debates.[xi] But to my mind, Talisse's recent complaints about Dewey's idea of experience (and democracy "as a way of life") are interesting and different from Rorty's, and cannot be addressed with those dialectics. For Talisse's challenges are directed toward those who see Dewey's use of "experience" as helpful for discussions about democracy, and so people such as Bernstein and myself need to respond. After a brief recap of Talisse's position I will start to make, if not a rebuttal, a response.

Talisse and Dewey's Comprehensive View

To quickly rehearse his view, Talisse argues that Dewey's idea of experience is ill-suited for democratic theory because regardless of how non-dogmatic and flexible this account of experience is—no matter how *perspectival*, *transactional*, *experimental*, or *aesthetic* Dewey makes his formulation—it is nevertheless a *philosophical* account of experience. Such accounts, according to Talisse, are "thick" not thin; they are comprehensive or metaphysical views about the big questions of life; they are not restricted to issues we would be content to call "procedural." These thick accounts can be *reasonably* contested by others with *differing* (thick) views of experience. Thus, any efforts made to promulgate Deweyan democratic theory are, de facto, promulgations of Dewey's underlying (thick) view of experience. By advancing such version of democratic theory, Deweyans either exclude or oppress those whose democratic views fail to share Dewey's underlying account of "experience."[xii] Thus, Dewey's democratic theory cannot be implemented with contradicting itself, pragmatically; that is, its implementation would be "un-democratic."

To date, my responses to Talisse have largely relied on an appeal to the perspectival and experimental approach of Dewey's entire philosophical project—not just his approach to experience as a central philosophical idea. Dewey's account of experience is so *open* (non-prescriptive), I have argued, that its content can be fulfilled by a huge plurality of individual and communal goals *without* violating Dewey's core value of having people work out their *own* answers by consulting their *own* experience, all the while *communicating* to keep conflict to a minimum. Citing Dewey's thoroughgoing and progressive experimentalism, I thought, could inoculate Dewey against Talisse's charge it was *still* a comprehensive view which *in its*

implications for democracy was no different than other more authoritarian ones. And while I admit to feeling insecure about it, I still think this tactic for defending Dewey has merit.

However, as I have continued to examine not only Dewey's notion of experience, but his finer grained notion of "primary" experience, questions have arisen for me surrounding his notion of primary experience which I cannot resolve. It is not clear whether or not these concerns strengthen Talisse's argument—because they further problematize the coherence of the concept of "experience" itself—or whether they are, instead, merely tangential. Nevertheless, to enlist my readers' assistance, I wish to raise them here.

The ineffability of primary experience

My first concern about experience regards the nature of primary experience. In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey advanced the rather evolutionary notion each new moment is so constituted by uniqueness, novelty, and chance that it could never be exhaustively predicted by rational systems. There is something radically fresh in *how* experience is *had*, and what is *had* is not only individual but shared in social life. In Dewey's philosophical jargon, what is had is "primary experience," and the "denotative method" points towards it. Yet, Dewey also described primary experience as "ineffable." "Immediate things," Dewey writes, "may be pointed to by words, but not described or defined." (LW1:75)[xiii] Without going into it, the problem is that Dewey declares that experience at its most primary is undefinable, indescribable, and ineffable--*yet, it can be pointed to*. How can Dewey's "denotative method" (or any other) point to something which cannot be characterized? To point or gesture, even vaguely, as something—rather than something else—is to at least to disambiguate it by a (tacit) characterization.

We can connect this puzzle about the ineffability of primary experience to the larger and foregoing question about experience and democracy with two questions. First, if primary experience is ineffable, it seems to follow that it cannot be reliably pointed to; if this is true, then how can it serve as the as a "check" on democratic theory? Second, if Talisse's concerns about thick or metaphysical views are valid, then does not the fact that Dewey had a theory *not only* of experience but of *primary* experience serve as confirming evidence for Talisse's claim that Dewey held a metaphysical which is reasonably rejectable? I have no answer to these questions, so let me move on to my second concern.

The experimental check provided by primary experience

My second concern about experience regards Dewey's claim that primary experience (which is predominantly non-theoretical) provides a way to "go back" and "check" the truth or warrant of theoretical claims. One sees that in Dewey's denotative method, like in experimental science, there is a demand that theory be checked. Such checking is accomplished via an active, social, and often physical process. By coordinating communication and action, we corroborate hypotheses and theoretical claims. In other words, we *verify* a proposal's warrant by coaxing others to *try out* what we have undergone and compare what they find. In effect, our method justifies its beliefs by inducing others to have and report on *primary experiences.*

Again, this was the epistemic point Dewey had in mind when he urged philosophers to "go back to *the primitive situations of life* that antecede and generate [their] reflective interpretations." Such efforts to "go back" will, he argues, put "us knowingly and cautiously through steps which were first taken uncritically, and exposed to all kinds of adventitious influence." (LW1:386, my emphasis) What is interesting about Dewey's phrase "the primitive situations of life" is that it

places an emphasis not on what is abstract or cognitive (as if "going back" was just about "checking one's work"); rather, the emphasis is upon *situations* which are undergone and cumulatively reshaped over time by further experience, both suffered (primary) and reflective (secondary).[xiv] But this is where things get tricky. For while Dewey relies upon phrases like "going back" or "returning" to primary experience, it is actually impossible to "go back" to the *same* primary experience which funded a theory's creation; a flowing river cannot be used to "check" itself, since it is never the same river twice.

How, then, can primary experience *check* theory? Clearly not the way a ruler checks the length of a line. Rather, it checks theory *by assessing the pragmatic value of theory's results*. Here is how I would frame it:

> As we live our lives—that is, in the course of primary experience—we encounter problems; some of those problems are knotty enough to force us to pause, reflect, and devise a theory about what is wrong and what needs to be done. To say that a theory is "checked" by primary experience is to say that its directs the course of further primary experience toward desired outcomes and directions. Things get "better" rather than "worse."

The check on theory is an experiential check, a socially mediated check. The operative question is whether or not the frustration or obstruction created by a problematic situation can be mitigated—and the flow of experience reestablished—to the satisfaction of the person or persons who have initiated a specific inquiry. Such an assessment does not call a theory or judgment *true* or *false*, but rather "good enough" or "not good enough"—where "enough" is always indexed to

the pervasive, underlying quality at issue in the tester's problematic situation.[xv] It is worth remarking that one can only "check" a theory in concert with other inquirers *if* there is at least tacit agreement about norms regarding *which* procedure and vocabulary are "proper" (or adequate) to describe *what* has been experienced. The establishment of *those* norms of experimentation indicate the presence of even deeper agreements (again, perhaps, tacit) regarding the long term values and purposes connected with the use of the method of experimental inquiry to test, fix, and report what all will agree to call "true" or "reasonable."

Radical Pluralism

Perhaps it seems as if I have resolved my concern about the kind of "check" primary experience places on theory. Deweyans may be satisfied, but many others will not. Their dissatisfaction is instructive and helps further illuminate the way in which Dewey's answer fails to satisfy critics like Talisse.

Consider the case of the religious believer who does not see the scientific method as at all decisive. In other words, someone who does *not* share the experimental norms about what it means to verify, experiment, or corroborate. Such types pose a serious test for Deweyan experience, one of radical pluralism. Let us say this person denies evolutionary biology and offers the following rebuke to philosophers and scientists who have been insisting that the religious argument is logically inconsistent:

> Christian Denier of Evolution: You've demonstrated that Creationists don't always reason consistently across all cases, and that we are inflexible about some of our religious interpretations. We admit all of this to be true. But now *you* must see that inconsistency and inflexibility are *necessary* for reproducing

our identity—they are tools which sustain our tribe. Indeed, it is you who must explain why we should we privilege your values—your logical norm of "consistency," your experimental norm of "fallible" interpretations. Why should we privilege them over the ideological values sustained by our narrative?

To put this in reasonable language (that you can understand): we determine what is epistemically permissible by consulting our cultural values. We place loyalty to our religious community above what your William James in *Pragmatism* called scientists' "almost religious" esteem for facts. Your scientists are devout about facts. We are devout about God. *Q.E.D.*

The Deweyan can try to respond to such objections by explaining that experimental method is transparent and open to correction; they can demonstrate how proper scientific experiments deal in choices which are, as Dewey puts it, "avowed," so that *anyone* else who wants to can evaluate for themselves an experiment's conditions, procedures, and purposes. Then, they can try to repeat it. As Dewey put it,

> The purport of thinking, scientific and philosophic, is not to eliminate choice but to render it less arbitrary and more significant....When choice is avowed, others can repeat the course of the experience; it is an experiment to be tried, not an automatic safety device. (LW1:35)

The Scientific Choir will all sing along with this, but *such words will not satisfy those who don't care about transparency, corroboration by shared experience, and fallibility of results*. They just

aren't even in the same game. Fairly or not, the question Talisse requires a Deweyan democrat to answer is: How do you deal with such hold outs? How does the theory of the Deweyan democrat handle this kind of case? With experience? Pshaw. Experience cannot solve *this* problem.

Conclusion: Trying Other Strategies

Alas, I have no good answer for Dewey. I suspect there is something wrong with the question, an immoderate expectation for what democratic theory can or should do, but I cannot prove this suspicion here. Dewey's view, as I read it, recognizes the possibility of such radically plural objections but refrains from trying to game out how such objections are to be forestalled by abstract argument or theory. So, in those cases where we do not share something as fundamental as an empirical and experimental approach to problem solving, the Deweyan approach recommends recourse to other strategies for invoking common ground. He refers to such non-argumentative tactics as a search for "total attitude," namely, a "more comprehensive point of view from which the divergences may be brought together, and consistency or continuity of experience recovered." (MW9:336) [xvi] Progress towards a total attitude is made by remaining persistent in our interactions with others, regardless of theoretical or ideological disagreements. This may, for example, amount to dealing with a common threat or experiencing a common enjoyment (a joke or a meal or a game) or by going *through* things (i.e. having *primary* experiences with others); in these ways, non-communicative antagonists *may* come to see common values previously invisible. This change, in essence coming to see the other differently, is fundamental to making progress in just that area of epistemic disagreement which caused all the pessimism to begin with. Such a method is fallible and there is no certainty that it can resolve all disagreements or prevent all complaints over "oppression." But it is deeply reverent of the perspectives of others and the need to keep creating democracy as we all try to get along.

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NOTES

[i] This essay was originally delivered as one of three keynote addresses at the "Second Nordic

Pragmatism Conference: Pragmatism in Society and Democracy," Reykjavík, Iceland, August

27-29, 2009. Here, I have made minor changes to that address, but have kept it largely

unchanged. Bits and pieces of this essay were previously published in "Public Administration as

Pragmatic, Democratic, and Objective," *Public Administration Review* 68:2, 2008, pp. 222-229.

My thanks to the journal and its editor, Richard Stillman, for permission to use those portions

here. Other portions of the essay were published, in Italian, as "L'esperienza potrebbe essere più

di un metodo? Il punto di partenza pratico di Dewey." *Discipline Filofische* 19:2, 2009, pp. 81-

102. Edited by Roberto Brigati and Roberto Frega and translated into Italian by Roberto Frega.

[ii] Beiner, Ronald. *What's the Matter with Liberalism?. (*Berkeley: University of California Press,

2005), 34. Thanks to Robert Talisse for pointing me toward this book.

[iii] Standard references to John Dewey's work are to the critical (print) edition, *The Collected*

Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois

University Press, 1969-1991), published in three series as *The Early Works* (EW), *The Middle*

Works (MW) and *The Later Works* (LW). "LW5:270," for example, refers to *The Later Works*, volume 5, page 270.

iv Talisse, Robert B. Democracy After Liberalism: Pragmatism and Deliberative Politics (Routledge, 2004); A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy (Routledge, 2007).

v "Review: *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy."* Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews, August 19, 2008. URL: http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=13965. See also, *Dewey: A Beginner's Guide* (Oneworld, 2008), pp. 121-122.

vi In Dewey's view of human growth and development, there is no *natural* antagonism between the individual self and society any more than there is an antagonism between the a note and the harmonic context in which it manifests. Whether one grows up amidst conservative Mormons or liberal environmentalists, individual growth is dependent upon the opportunities to create and interact with others that the community provides. Moreover, the degree to which an individual acts mainly in consent or dissent with her community is irrelevant to the fundamental importance of community—for it is only as one strives to make and remake one's family, company, religion, or country does one become an individual in any interesting sense at all.

vii James Campbell gives an apt illustration of the social dimension of inquiry mentioned above, especially its dynamic pattern, provisional results, correction via social experience. Campbell writes, "In our reasonably well functioning social system something happens and doubts and conflicts arise. Recognition of this trouble results in the development of a self-conscious public and the formulation of the problem. In its attempts to address the problem, the public then proceeds in some organized fashion through a process of social inquiry, hypothesizing and testing. The results of this inquiry, some proposed institutional change involving new laws or modified regulations, are then

hypothetically introduced and socially evaluated. And, if all goes well, this hypothetical

solution is adopted and works as a solution to the problem." See James Campbell,

Understanding John Dewey: Nature and Cooperative Intelligence, (Chicago and La

Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1995) 148.

[viii] In any debate about policy, Dewey writes, "There may well be honest divergence as to

policies to be pursued, even when plans spring from knowledge of the same facts. But genuinely

public policy cannot be generated unless it be informed by knowledge, and this knowledge does

not exist except when there is systematic, thorough, and well-equipped search and record."

(LW2:346)

[ix] See Gregory F. Pappas, *Dewey's Ethics: Democracy As Experience* (Indiana University

Press, 2008), 23.

[x] See *Richard Bernstein, "*The Ineluctable Lure And Risks Of Experience." *History and Theory*

45 (May 2006), 261-275. See also Martin Jay, *Songs Of Experience: Modern American and*

European Variations On a Universal Theme, (Berkeley: University of California Press,

2004), pp. x, 431.

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^{xi} I have focused on the ways in which Neopragmatists like Rorty and Hilary Putnam have misrepresented (intentionally or not) Dewey's concept of experience, and I have tried to spell out why Deweyan experience (as I understand it) is immune from Rorty's charges that experience is just traditional Substance in yet one more disguise. See Hildebrand, *Beyond Realism and Antirealism: John Dewey and the Neopragmatists*, (Vanderbilt University Press, 2003) and "Avoiding Wrong Turns: A Philippic Against The Linguistification of Pragmatism," in *Dewey, Pragmatism and Economic Methodology*, edited by Elias L. Khalil (London: Routledge, 2004) pp. 73-86. On Putnam see *Beyond Realism* and "Putnam, Pragmatism, and Dewey," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 36:1, 2000, pp. 109-132;

^{xii} Talisse's argument isn't singling out the Deweyan view, per se. Indeed, anyone else who tied their theory of democracy to a positive metaphysical view—Kantianism, Epicurean atomism, *whatever*—would, in effect, face the same objection Talisse raises against Dewey.

^{xiii} Here, from *Experience and Nature*, is the larger quotation: "Immediacy of existence is ineffable. But there is nothing mystical about such ineffability; it expresses the fact that of direct existence it is futile to say anything to one's self and impossible to say anything to another. Discourse can but intimate connections which if followed out may lead one to have an existence....Immediate things may be pointed to by words, but not described or defined. Description when it occurs is but a part of a circuitous method of pointing or denoting; index to a starting point and road which if taken may lead to a direct and ineffable presence." (LW1:74-75)

xiv For example, my primary experiences with cars are reshaped as I ride in them, learn to drive them, pay for their maintenance, read their histories, appreciate their aesthetic and environmental impact. Every fresh encounter with them—every primary experience—derives its character, in part, from all these experiences.

xv In evaluating a particular judgment, Dewey writes, "[E]nough is always enough, and the underlying quality is itself the test of the "enough" for any particular case. All that is needed is to determine this quality by indicating the limits between which it moves and the direction or tendency of its movement....Any proposition that serves the purpose for which it is made is logically adequate." (LW5:255)

xvi For more on the creation of a "total attitude" as well as on the debate between science and religion over evolution, see Hildebrand, "Does Every Theory Deserve A Hearing? Evolution, Creationism, and the Limits of Democratic Inquiry," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* XLIV: June 2006, pp. 217-236.