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Does Dewey have an “epistemic argument” for democracy?

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Abstract: The analysis and defence of democracy on the grounds of its epistemic powers is now a well-established, if contentious, area of theoretical and empirical research. This article reconstructs a distinctive and systematic epistemic account of democracy from Dewey's writings. Running like a thread through this account is a critical analysis of the distortion of hierarchy and class division on social knowledge, which Dewey believes democracy can counteract. The article goes on to argue that Dewey's account has the resources to defuse at least some important forms of the broader charges of instrumentalism and depoliticization that are directed at the epistemic project. The gloomy conviction of the stratified character of capitalist societies and the conflictual character of their politics shapes Dewey's view of political agency, and this article outlines how this epistemic conception of democracy is deployed as a critical standard for judging and transforming existing political forms but also serves as a line of defence for democratic political forms against violent and authoritarian alternatives.

Keywords: John Dewey, democratic theory, epistemic democracy, pragmatism

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Does Dewey have an “epistemic argument” for democracy?

I. Introduction

The analysis and defence of democracy on the grounds of its epistemic powers is now a well-established, if contentious, area of theoretical and empirical research.¹ Epistemic democrats have developed a cluster of arguments to the effect that the wisdom of the many can be mobilized by democratic arrangements and that this provides an important defence of democracy.

Within democratic theory, a host of democratic skeptics has unsurprisingly descended on this idea, in a broad coalition that encompasses followers of both Arendt and Rawls – with their distinct projects of driving a wedge between cognitive values such as truth and politics – as well as agonists and egalitarian proceduralists. From these different perspectives, these

¹ For example, Elizabeth Anderson, “The Epistemology of Democracy”, *Episteme*, 3, nos. 1-2 (2006): 8-22; Joshua Cohen, “An Epistemic Conception of Democracy”, *Ethics*, 97 (1986): 26-38; David Estlund, “Beyond Fairness and Deliberation: The Epistemic Dimension of Democratic Authority” in James Bohman and William Rehg, *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 173-204; David Estlund, *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), Robert Goodin, *Reflective Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, trans. W. Rehg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996); Jack Knight and James Johnson, *The Priority of Democracy: The Political Consequences of Pragmatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Jack Knight, Hélène Landemore, Nadia Urbinati and Daniel Viehoff, “Roundtable on Epistemic Democracy and Its Critics”, *Critical Review*, 28, no. 2 (2016): 137-70; Hélène Landemore, *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Josiah Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Melissa Schwartzberg, “Epistemic Democracy and Its Challenges”, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 18 (2015): 187-204.

critics argue, as Nadia Urbinati puts it, that epistemic democracy aspires to “objective standards for the evaluation of social choices that are above political communication and its procedures”.² In doing so, it offers “a radical attempt to depoliticize democracy by making it a chapter in the search for truth”. A first question is how an instrumental justification of democratic institutions in terms of epistemic capacity sits alongside a non-instrumental justification of (for example) procedural equality, or an instrumental justification in terms of some other value such as autonomy.³ Does the former imply that the latter is only instrumentally justified – that citizens have political rights only since they can contribute to epistemically superior decisions? In spite of the expressed intentions of proponents of the epistemic conception, critics fear that epistemic democracy itself promotes a technocratic mentality. Plenty of us have doubts about the epistemic capacities of many citizens. We may even scoff at them; that is, at each other. This seems to be part and parcel of a democratic society. If democracy is valued only instrumentally for producing superior epistemic outcomes, these doubts open up space for opponents to mount a case for non-democratic forms of rule on the back of criticisms of the cognitive powers of voters and democratic systems.⁴ Furthermore, to its critics the epistemic conception of democracy suggests an

² Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth and the People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 96.

³ In this paper, I’m bracketing epistemic accounts of democratic authority of legitimacy (for which the superior epistemic capacities of democracy provide us with a reason to be bound by its decisions) in order to discuss the broader and weaker justificatory claim (the epistemic capacities of democracy provide us with a reason to support it). For the former, see Estlund, *Democratic Authority*.

⁴ Cf. Lisa Hill, “Voting Turnout, Equality, Liberty and Representation: Epistemic versus Procedural Democracy”, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 19, no. 3 (2016): 283-300; Guido Pincione and Fernando R. Tesón, *Rational Choice and Democratic Deliberation: A Theory of Discourse Failure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

unrealistically cerebral view of politics as a quest to promote the “GNT, the gross national truth”, in one sardonic formulation, which glosses over the passionate assertion of antagonistic claims by different classes, interest groups, identities and ideologies.⁵

John Dewey’s thought seems to provide a rich set of potential resources for the epistemic democrat. He tells us, for example, that:

The foundation of democracy is faith in the capacities of human nature; faith in human intelligence, and in the power of pooled and cooperative experience. It is not belief that these things are complete but that if given a show they will grow and be able to generate progressively the knowledge and wisdom needed to guide collective action.⁶

However, the contours of Dewey’s epistemic account, along with the question of whether there is an argument of this sort at all in his work, and its implications (if he does have one) remain contested. For some interpreters, elements of Dewey’s work support a view of democracy as a collective exercise in practical intelligence, although this is characterized in a variety of ways.⁷ According to James Kloppenberg, for instance, Dewey’s “democratic community replicates the community of broadly conceived scientific inquiry that serves as

⁵ Stephen Holmes, *Passions and Constraint: On the Theory of Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press), p. 193 (citing Samuel Finer).

⁶ John Dewey, “Democracy and Educational Administration”, in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 11, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), p. 219.

⁷ E.g., Hilary Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 180-202; Raymond Geuss, *History and Illusion in Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 124-8; Anderson, “Epistemology and Democracy”; Jose Medina, J. 2012. *The Epistemology of Resistance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Knight and Johnson, *Priority of Democracy*, Landemore, *Democratic Reason*, pp. 82-5.

the prototype of instrumental reasoning”.⁸ Hilary and Ruth Anna Putnam identify Dewey’s “epistemological justification of democracy”, in which democracy is “the precondition for the full application of intelligence to the solution of social problems”.⁹ Elizabeth Anderson’s influential account of the epistemic powers of democracy springs from the belief that “Dewey’s experimentalist account of democracy as the collective exercise of practical intelligence offers rich resources for evaluating the epistemic powers of particular democratic institutions, and for suggesting reforms to improve these powers”, particularly in the value it attaches to the importance of diversity and challenge in improving social knowledge.¹⁰ For Hélène Landemore, Dewey forms part of her genealogy of epistemic democracy, offering an account of how pre-discursive common interests can be clarified and articulated through public discussion.¹¹

For skeptics about Dewey as epistemic democrat, including, for example, such authoritative readers as Robert Westbrook and Cheryl Misak, Dewey has no epistemic argument to speak of, only a broad orientation and a set of hopeful but unsupported assertions. Westbrook persuasively suggests that “one cannot find in Dewey’s considerable logical writings (or elsewhere) an *argument* that one could call a logical argument for democracy”.¹² A recent challenge claims to identify a plausible pragmatist epistemological argument for democracy, but argues that Dewey’s thinking here marks a wrong turn, to be distinguished from a more credible account that emanates from C. S. Peirce’s conception of

⁸ James Kloppenberg, *The Virtues of Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 90.

⁹ Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*, p. 180.

¹⁰ Anderson, “Epistemology and Democracy”: 18.

¹¹ Landemore, *Democratic Reason*, pp. 82-3.

¹² Robert B. Westbrook, *Democratic Hope: The Politics of Truth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 179, emphasis in original.

truth.¹³ Misak in her deft and magisterial account of the American pragmatists finds that while Dewey offers an epistemic conception of democracy, he “struggles in an especially pressing way” with explaining the value of this to a skeptic.¹⁴

Overlaid on these debates about the identification and validity of an epistemic argument in Dewey, there is a set of questions about the political character of this strand in this thought. One of the most important earlier lines of criticism of Dewey’s thought that he has a reductive view of political democracy “on an analogy to the community of scientists” with the result that “issues are defined in objective terms, and there are (in the political sense) no interest groups, factions, or social classes passionately asserting their antagonistic claims”.¹⁵ This view of his understanding of democracy fuelled a broader interpretation of Dewey’s political philosophy as the “acquiescent” fig-leaf for power politics or a blithely technocratic philosophy. Recent scholarship has dismantled this technocratic interpretation of

¹³ For a fuller discussion of this approach, see Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation* (London: Routledge, 2000); Cheryl Misak, *The American Pragmatists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Cheryl Misak and Robert Talisse, “Pragmatist Epistemology and Democratic Theory”, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 22 (2014): 366-76; Matthew Festenstein, “Deliberative Democracy and Two Models of Pragmatism”, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 7 (2004): 291-306.

¹⁴ Misak, *American Pragmatists*, p. 136.

¹⁵ Gale Kennedy, “The Process of Evaluation in a Democratic Community”, *Journal of Philosophy*, 56 (1959): 256. See also Lewis Mumford, *The Golden Day* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1926); Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1934); C. Wright Mills, *Sociology and Pragmatism: The Higher Learning in America* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1969); Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 495-523.

Dewey's political thought.¹⁶ Indeed, important recent interpretations have argued that Dewey is a theorist of popular contention – of class struggle, strike action, social movements, industrial democracy, civil disobedience, and coercive political action.¹⁷ However, in putting the contentious character of Dewey's political thinking at the centre of their interpretations these authors raise from a different direction the question of the structure and place of Dewey's epistemic claims.

Here I want to bring together these debates. The focus of this paper is to shed some light on what Dewey's pragmatism can bring to thinking about epistemic democracy, and to show how his thought addresses the challenges of instrumentalism and depoliticization leveled by critics of the epistemic line of argument. The first step (in the following section) is to outline his thinking about the relationship of epistemology and democracy, which I try to show consists of four claims in a distinctive nested structure. Running like a thread through the epistemic accounts is a critical analysis of the distortion of hierarchy and class division on social knowledge, which democracy can counteract. Understanding this structure allows us (in section III) to see the shape of a Deweyan response to contemporary concerns about an epistemic approach to democracy, partly through an understanding of the relationship between the apparently divergent epistemic and “contentious” strands in his thought. The

¹⁶ See Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York: Norton, 1995), Matthew Festenstein, *Pragmatism and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997).

¹⁷ Marc Stears, *Demanding Democracy: American Radicals in Search of a New Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Jeffrey Jackson, “Dividing Deliberative and Participatory Democracy Through John Dewey”, *Democratic Theory*, 2 (2015): 63-84; John Medearis, *Why Democracy is Oppositional* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); Alex Livingston, “Between Means and Ends: Reconstructing Coercion in Dewey's Democratic Theory”, *American Political Science Review*, 111 (2017): 522-34.

gloomy conviction of the stratified character of capitalist societies and the conflictual character of their politics shapes his view of political agency, and I'll outline below how his epistemic conception of democracy is deployed as a critical standard for judging and transforming existing political forms but also acts as a line of defence for democratic politics.

A few broad orienting points are in order. The approach here is blatantly reconstructive. It isn't difficult to find statements throughout Dewey's voluminous oeuvre that support the idea that he believes that there is a significant connection between epistemological and wider social and political questions. For instance, he assures us that we can only understand democracy through the lens of his conception of inquiry: "[d]emocracy is estimable only through the changed conception of intelligence that forms modern science".¹⁸ At the same time, "the theory of inquiry" isn't a matter of only philosophical significance but should "assume and hold a position of primary human importance".¹⁹ Yet what Dewey has to say about this relationship is scattered widely and is not the subject of a single unified treatment. Many of his discussions of politics are occasional and may be best understood with reference to the specific context in which they were written. And there are very important differences among different phases of his work that I'll gloss over here (although there is no discussion of his earliest, heavily idealist-influenced philosophy, and the focus is on his later work). The discussion here picks its way through this contextual detail in order to block out a broader set of arguments in Dewey's work about the epistemic capacities of democracy, and how this relates to some of the other values he thinks important to this idea.

¹⁸ John Dewey, "Intelligence and Morals", in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, vol. 4, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), p. 39.

¹⁹ John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 12, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), p. 527.

The language of “epistemic”, “cognitive”, “epistemological”, etc., although I’ll use it here, does not fit comfortably with much of Dewey’s own usage. Dewey seeks to offer an account of belief formation against the backdrop of a wider field of human practical involvement. Epistemic concepts play a role against the background of Dewey’s practical conceptions of experience, intelligence and inquiry. His scepticism about “the epistemology industry” (as opposed to knowledge) along with related deformations such as the “intellectualist bias” stems from a sense that dominant ways of thinking about belief and knowledge detach these from this background, and he develops (and redevelops) a vocabulary that he thinks will be less prone to this bias.

II. The structure of Dewey’s epistemic argument

Dewey offers a number of different pictures of the relationship of epistemic values and democracy, which we can gather under four headings. Each makes a distinct claim, resting on independent grounds, for an epistemic claim on behalf of democracy. At the same time, I want to show how the succession of claims here is cumulative, in the sense that the later claims (in my presentation) include the earlier ones. These points also fit together, I’ll try to show, as different components in his overall naturalized picture of inquiry.

I also want to show how each of these claims deploys a slightly different conception of democracy. Dewey’s conception of democracy is notoriously idiosyncratic. While it is commonplace to think of Dewey as distinctively the theorist of democracy as “more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience”, this idea takes different forms in different places in his democratic thinking.²⁰

²⁰ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, vol. 9, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), p. 93. It is “superficial” to think that “government is located in Washington and Albany. There is government in the family, in business, in the church, in every social group” which regulates

Further, while Dewey refers rather scathingly in contrast to a conception of democracy as mere “machinery” for decision-making, he is committed to improving this machinery rather than merely dismissing it as unimportant. The real target of his ire is the identification of democracy *exclusively* with a current set of political institutions, particularly only with elections and majority rule. He thinks that this contains an inbuilt conservative bias that prevents more imaginative institutional thinking: indeed, subverting an assumption commonly attributed to him, he says that the “old saying” that the cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy is “not apt” if by this is meant introducing more machinery of the same kind that already exists.²¹

[i] Pragmatic self-contradiction. The most prominent example of this line of thought is Dewey’s argument in *The Public and Its Problems* against Walter Lippmann’s defence of “the responsible administrator” as epistemically superior to the befuddled general citizen.²² Against this, Dewey argues that the claim for the epistemic superiority of an expert class, when it is closed off from contestation and correction through democratic debate, is self-defeating: “in the absence of an articulate voice on the part of the masses, the best do not and cannot remain the best, the wise cease to be wise ... In the degree to which they become a specialized class, they are shut off from knowledge of the needs which they are supposed to serve”. So the merit of even the existing “rudimentary” form of democracy is that it “compels the behaviour of its members (John Dewey, “Democracy and Educational Administration”, *Later Works*, p. 221).

²¹ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 2, ed. J Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p. 325; John Dewey and James H. Tufts, *Ethics*, second edition, in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 7, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), pp. 333-4.

²² Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press, 1965); Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New York: MacMillan, 1925).

... recourse to methods of discussion, consultation and persuasion”, and in doing so provides the opportunity to improve decisions.²³

The epistemic standards that purportedly govern a technocratic elite’s epistemic mission are in pragmatic conflict with the exclusion of those whose needs they are supposed to serve. To the extent that epistemically superior outcomes tend to emerge from processes of open and inclusive challenge, discussion and consultation, an epistemic elite needs to bind itself to these processes. And democracy provides the best institutional conditions for this, through institutionalizing “effective guarantees of free inquiry, free assembly and free communication” as well as ways of holding rulers to account and of informing them of their mistakes.²⁴

Although well-known, this argument has a relatively narrow scope. It appeals only to the “responsible administrator” seeking to benefit from democratic engagement in allowing her to achieve self-avowed goals of understanding public needs. The end-in-view, knowledge of public needs, can’t be achieved without engagement and participation of those whose needs are at issue. So this first line of argument isn’t intended for a person or institution lacking a commitment to these goals. It is also worth noting that this is only an instrumental defence of democracy in its “machine” sense: political machinery has a value since it fosters

²³ Dewey, *Public*, p. 364. Specialists “represent a social division of labor; and their specialization can be trusted only when such persons are in unobstructed cooperation with other social occupations, sensitive to others’ problems and transmitting results to them for wider application in action” (John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, vol. 12, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), p. 164).

²⁴ John Dewey, “Creative Democracy – The Task before Us”, in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 14, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), pp. 224–230. See also Dewey, *Public*, pp. 290-3, 364-6; Anderson, “Epistemology and Democracy”.

consultation and debate, which in turn allows for the expression of wider public interests.

[ii] Epistemic costs of hierarchy. This first idea [i] is nested within Dewey's general view of the epistemic dangers of hierarchy and privilege: "[s]uch social divisions as interfere with free and full intercourse react to make intelligence and knowing of members of the separated classes one-sided".²⁵ This is a wider claim about the distorting impact of social power than [i] since it focuses not only on a self-proclaimed epistemic elite's claim to technical authority but on social privilege and disadvantage more generally. The claim here is not only that one group fails to meet its own epistemic standards but that the worldview of different classes is distorted, irrespective of how it views its own epistemic mission; that this distortion stems from the power relations and related inequalities of distribution among these classes; and that democracy, in Dewey's sense, counters this distortion.

Dewey presents some different reasons for this conclusion. One is that absence of "free and full intercourse" limits experience and opportunities to learn from one another.²⁶ Behind this, though, is a recognition that this "separation" often expresses or reproduces a structure of hierarchy and disadvantage. The inequitable distribution of power excludes many from epistemic resources. This may flow from censorship and propaganda but can just as effectively arise from informal market pressures: "[p]eople may be shut out from free access to ideas simply because of preoccupation of their time and energy [...] because of class barriers and because a limited minority group holds a virtual monopoly of whole ranges of ideas and of knowledge [...] It requires a common background of common experiences and of common desires to bring about this free distribution of knowledge".²⁷

²⁵ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 354.

²⁶ E.g., Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, pp. 354-5.

²⁷ John Dewey, "Politics and Culture", in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 6, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), p. 41.

It's also the case that membership of a privileged class is epistemically distorting for its members: "all special privilege narrows the outlook of those who possess it, as well as limits the possibilities of development of those not having it".²⁸ An important symptom of this for Dewey are the ideological justifications generated by dominant groups to explain their superior position. Privilege makes it difficult to resist the temptation to develop, and accept as true, self-serving justifications of this status: "[t]he intellectual blindness caused by privileged and monopolistic possession is made evident in 'rationalization' of the misery and cultural degradation of others which attend its existence. These are asserted to be the fault of those who suffer; to be the consequence of their own improvidence, lack of industry, wilful ignorance, etc."²⁹ In other words, the self-serving prejudices of the privileged classes are held in place not only by "separation" – the absence of any challenge or alternative perspective on inherited beliefs – but by their function in supporting this privilege. Social hierarchies reproduce themselves in knowledge hierarchies, which in turn support the social hierarchy. Dewey's well-known analysis of the history of philosophy in terms of the contrast between the knowledge of a leisurely theoretical class and practical knowledge is a further example of this line of thought.³⁰

²⁸ Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, p. 347.

²⁹ Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, pp. 347-8; Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 90. This anticipates some aspects of the concern with epistemic injustice: Medina, *Epistemology of Resistance*; Susan Dieleman, "Realism, Pragmatism and Critical Social Epistemology", in *Pragmatism and Justice*, ed. Susan Dieleman, David Rondel and Christopher Voparil (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 129-43; Paul Taylor, "An Aesthetics of Resistance: Deweyan Experimentalism and Epistemic Injustice", in *Pragmatism and Justice*, ed. Dieleman, Rondel and Voparil, pp. 215-30.

³⁰ For example, John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 2, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p. 4: "The depreciation of action, of doing and making, has been cultivated by philosophers. But while philosophers have perpetuated the derogation by formulating and justifying it, they did

Democracy is sometimes identified by Dewey with the overcoming of this separation.

In texts such as *Democracy and Education*, democratic society is viewed as constituted by free interaction or “conjoint communicated experience”. It is the “breaking down of those barriers of class, race and national territory that kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity”, countering the distortion that flows from social separation by removing the obstacles of class, status and identity to mutual learning.³¹ It doesn’t guarantee that this learning in fact takes place but provides conditions under which it can. Why does democracy have this effect? One response is that there is nothing to be said in a general way about the mechanisms at work here: there are only the specific analyses of particular distortions in context.³² However, the generality of Dewey’s formulations (“all special privilege...”) suggest that this isn’t his view. The claim about the epistemic distortions of hierarchy and privilege need to be seen as nested in his wider conception of inquiry and democratic interaction.

[iii] Democratic conditions of inquiry. “The very heart of political democracy is adjudication of social differences by discussion and exchange of views”, Dewey writes in a late essay. “This method provides a rough approximation to the method of effecting change by means of experimental inquiry and test”.³³ To understand the force and scope of this claim, we need to sketch out some key features of Dewey’s conception of experimental inquiry. These are

not originate it. They glorified their own office without a doubt in placing theory so much above practice. But independently of their attitude, many things conspired to the same effect...”

³¹ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 93, 354-5.

³² Gregory Pappas, “The Pragmatists’ Approach to Injustice”, *The Pluralist*, 11 (2016): 58-77.

³³ John Dewey, “Challenge to Liberal Thought”, in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 15, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), p. 273. i

articulated in various ways at different points but some important elements can be highlighted.

Now Dewey doesn't (as far as I can make out) say that democracies are like scientific communities, although this is a popular view among a wide range of interpreters. Rather in outline his position can be sketched as follows:

[1] In inquiry, we aim to solve problems.

[2] To be successful, this should be done experimentally.

[3] Conducting inquiry experimentally requires democracy, in his sense.

[4] So there is a reason to support democracy, grounded in the conditions for successful inquiry.

Let me consider these points in more detail, particularly the third.

Regarding [1], Dewey's basic move is to see our important epistemic relationship to the world as inquiry, and to view inquiry as a form of action or practice carried out by an agent.³⁴ We engage in inquiry as part of an existential struggle to cope with a precarious but improvable environment. Experience flows until a problematic situation is encountered or identified: then ideas, experiments, and the obstacle circumvented or direction changed. Inquiry is demanded by what he calls an incomplete situation; that is, one in which something must be done, as a response to precarious, unstable and uncertain conditions: "we are doubtful because the situation is inherently doubtful".³⁵ Inquiry is needed in order to define the specific problem that the situation presents and to re-establish in accordance with human purposes the provisional equilibrium which earlier held. Accordingly, he defines it as a practical project, "*the controlled and directed transformation of an indeterminate situation*

³⁴ There is a fuller discussion in Matthew Festenstein, "John Dewey: Inquiry, Ethics and Democracy" in *The Oxford Handbook of American Philosophy*, ed. Cheryl Misak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 87-109.

³⁵ Dewey, *Logic*, p. 109.

into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole”.³⁶ Practical deliberation is integrated into this conception of inquiry. Practical judgments (about choice of career, whether or not to get married, which political party to support) can be better or worse as ways of identifying and solving problems. A value is “constructed” as a solution to a problem in experience, and can be appraised by assessing the extent to which it solves the problem.

Turning to [2], Dewey’s key claim is that success in inquiry requires a radical openness on the part of inquirers. We hold some presuppositions of inquiry – methods, practices, standards – fixed in order to identify a problem and arrive at a determinate solution. But inquiry requires a thoroughgoing fallibilism, a preparedness to consider reasons for and against any belief or presupposition. A constitutive condition of inquiry from this pragmatist perspective is the openness of its claims and standards to testing against experience: “[a]dherence to any body of doctrines and dogmas based upon a specific authority signifies distrust in the power of experience to provide, in its own ongoing movement, the needed principles of belief and action”.³⁷

For Dewey, then, the step to [3] rests on identifying this openness with a conception of democracy: “[d]emocracy is the faith that the process of experience is more important than any special result attained, so that special results achieved are only of ultimate value as they are used to enrich and order the ongoing process”.³⁸ In this sense, democracy is understood as consisting in and as providing the conditions for experimental inquiry. Robust inquiry requires that we must have access to evidence, arguments, other forms of information, and processes of reason-exchange. If we want our inquiry to be successful, we should not

³⁶ Dewey, *Logic*, p. 108, emphasis in original.

³⁷ John Dewey, “What I Believe”, in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 5, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p. 267.

³⁸ Dewey 1939, “Creative Democracy”, p. 229.

prejudge its outcomes, by excluding sources of experience that allow us to explore and correct our hypotheses. By contrast:

Every authoritarian scheme, on the contrary, assumes that its value may be assessed by some *prior* principle, if not of family and birth or race and color or possession of material wealth, then by the position and rank the person occupies in the existing social scheme. The democratic faith in equality is the faith that each individual shall have the chance and opportunity to contribute whatever he is capable of contributing, and that the value of his contribution be decided by its place and function in the organized total of similar contributions: -- not on the basis of prior status of any kind whatever.³⁹

Social and political values are themselves not fixed standards but revisable hypotheses, the implications of which are worked through in practice and which are judged in the light of their consequences in the widest sense for everyone involved. In order to identify and solve problems we need to have in place the conditions for problem-solving. Democratic institutions and culture, including security of a range of individual rights for all, provide the best social conditions for this, because at least in principle they allow for openness, epistemic diversity, experiment, contestation and revision.⁴⁰ Hierarchy and snobbery undermine this constitutive commitment to openness, like epistemological fixity, since they prejudice thinking about social problems.

It's an important feature of Dewey's thinking here that this conception of inquiry doesn't assume that there is a determinate solution available in all cases.⁴¹ Indeed, he highlights differences of opinion as well as conflicts of interest and value pluralism as

³⁹ Dewey, "Democracy and Educational Administration", p. 220.

⁴⁰ Dewey, *Public*, pp. 356-62; Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, p. 358.

⁴¹ Ella Myers, *Worldly Ethics: Democratic Politics and Care for the World* (Durham: Duke University Press 2013), p. 104; Livingston, "Means and Ends", p. 530.

ineliminable features of social and political life. Even when his epistemological standards are adhered to, “[d]ifferences of opinion in the sense of differences of judgment as to the course which it is best to follow, the policy which it is best to try out, will still exist”.⁴² A heritage of conflicting ethical traditions also presents an obstacle to shared social criteria for problem-solving. These tensions among different ethical outlooks cannot be resolved in theory – only in practice, if at all, where an agent must make “the best adjustment he can among forces which are genuinely disparate”.⁴³ I’ll return to the character and significance of this emphasis on pluralism and conflict in section III.

[iv] The democratic ideal. This fourth step is rooted in what Dewey calls an “ideal” conception of democracy as self-rule. He often refers to this as an ideal or generic idea of democracy. Dewey thinks of the democrat, in this sense, as hypothesizing that individual self-development and collective self-determination go together, and using this as a critical standard to appraise social and political conditions: “from an ethical point of view”, Dewey says, “the democratic ideal poses, rather than solves, the great problem: How to harmonize the development of each individual with the maintenance of a social state in which the activities of one will contribute to the good of all the others”.⁴⁴ An ideal, in Dewey’s sense, is a hypothesis formed in non-ideal circumstances which suggests possibilities for action and for how our values may relate to one another. Ideals set out “visions”, understood as possibilities to be experimentally tested and explored, but they do not specify the specific

⁴² Dewey, *Public*, p. 362.

⁴³ John Dewey, “Three Independent Factors in Morals”, in *Later Works*, vol. 5, p. 288; Dewey, *Reconstruction*, pp. 173-4; Jennifer Welchman, “Dewey’s Moral Philosophy” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dewey*, ed. Molly Cochran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 166-86.

⁴⁴ Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, p. 350; Matthew Festenstein, “Ideal and Actual in Dewey’s Political Theory”, in *Pragmatism and Justice*, ed. Dieleman, Rondel and Voparil, pp. 97-114.

goals (Deweyan ends-in-view) that we work to. For this line of argument, the epistemic value of democratic participation rests on Dewey's specific ethical hypothesis, which he thinks is shared by those who share the democratic ideal.

For this ideal, the democratic criterion as a test of social institutions "demands the full development of individuals in their distinctive individuality".⁴⁵ Democracy "signifies, on one side, that every individual is to share in the duties and rights belonging to control of social affairs, and on the other side, that social arrangements are to eliminate those external arrangements of status, birth, wealth, sex, etc., which restrict the opportunity of each individual for full development of himself".⁴⁶ This argument then has the following shape. A person's freedom or individuality involves her having a regard for those conditions and objects which permit other members of the democratic community freely to exercise their own powers from their own initiative, reflection and choice. This involves "sympathetic regard for the intelligence of others, even if they hold views opposed to ours", the search for "things which unite men in common ends" and "integration of [...] divided purposes and conflicts of belief".⁴⁷ Being required to follow this rule, or attend to this regard, is a condition of self-development for the democrat, not a constraint upon it.

Blocking some people from inclusion on equal terms is not only (as in [i]) the *cause* of epistemic failure, standing in the way of accessing a procedure-independent interest. It is also constitutive of that blockage, since it subverts the possibility of participation on democratic terms, and in doing so frustrates access to the common regard that is needed for my self-development on these terms.⁴⁸ Epistemic inclusion is a condition of democratic

⁴⁵ Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, p. 348.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 348-9; cf. Dewey, *Public*, pp. 328-9.

⁴⁷ Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, p. 329; Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 98.

⁴⁸ "There is a moral tragedy inherent in efforts to further the common good which prevent the result from being either good or common – not good, because it is at the expense of the active

participation and so part of the democratic ideal, in Dewey's sense.

The claim that self-development in the relevant sense is important and that this common regard is necessary for it is open to a well-known ethical challenge to this kind of approach: why does my self-development require this? Why can't it be at the expense of others? There is certainly some evidence to support an interpretation of Dewey as rather bluntly stipulating that individual "growth" is somehow lacking or stunted in the absence of this common concern. So, for example, he says that "a member of a robber band may express his powers in a way consonant with belonging to that group and be directed by the interest common to its members. But he does so only at the cost of repression of those of his potentialities which can be realized only through membership in other groups".⁴⁹ Now Dewey here isn't just helping himself to a moralized conception of self-development. He doesn't imagine that the idea of self-development at the expense of others is nonsensical: "[t]hat a man may grow in efficiency as a burglar, as a gangster, as a corrupt politician cannot be doubted".⁵⁰ Rather, his point is that forms of self-development that exclude or oppress others conflict with the democratic ideal: the Deweyan conception of individual growth in democratic society doesn't aspire to be ethically neutral but is framed within the terms of this ideal. If I assert that engaging with others on terms of equality is repugnant to my own goals and values (or frustrates my capacities as a corrupt politician or gangster), Dewey isn't

growth of those to be helped, and not common because these have no share in bringing the result about. The social welfare can be advanced only by means which enlist the positive interest and active energy of those to be benefitted or "improved" . . . [W]ithout active cooperation both in forming aims and in carrying them out there is no possibility of a common good" (Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, p. 347).

⁴⁹ Dewey, *Public*, p. 328; Festenstein, *Pragmatism*; Robert Talisse, "A Farewell to Deweyan Democracy", *Political Studies*, 59 (2011).

⁵⁰ John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 13, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), p. 19.

seeking to show that from some ethically neutral standpoint my capacities are better served by my adopting a democratic view of self-development.

III. Instrumentalism and depoliticization

With this understanding of the structure of Dewey's epistemic claims about democracy in place, I want to turn to the resources that he gives us to understand and address the more general concerns about an epistemic approach to democracy, focusing on the two challenges of instrumentalism and depoliticization directed at epistemic accounts by democratic critics.

First, the exclusive concern with the epistemic quality of decisions means that democratic procedures are valued only instrumentally as mechanisms for achieving this outcome. However, we value democratic participation for other reasons too: as a non-instrumental expression of equal respect or as instrumental for achieving other values (e.g., autonomy, individual welfare). The demands of an epistemic conception of democracy clash with those of other conceptions and have perverse anti-democratic consequences. For example, if democracy is viewed as having at its core a commitment to equal respect for each citizen, this seems to conflict with the requirements of a search for truth, which may call for deference to the superior knowledge of experts.⁵¹ These undemocratic implications make the account of democratic decision-making politically vulnerable in principle to a technocratic move: privileging the value of the "correctness" of the outputs of decisions can provide grounds to exclude some citizens from input into decisions if it is judged that their participation may dilute the epistemic quality of the decisions.⁵²

⁵¹ Schwartzberg, "Epistemic Democracy", p. 194; Eric [MacGilvray](#), "Democratic Doubts: Pragmatism and the Epistemic Defence of Democracy", *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 22 (2014): 105-23.

⁵² Hill, "Voting Turnout"; Maria Paula Saffron and Nadia Urbinati, "Procedural Democracy, the Bulwark of Equal Liberty", *Political Theory*, 41 (2013): 441-81.

At a general level, as is well known, Dewey is skeptical about the distinction between something's being good in itself and merely instrumentally good, at least if this is more than a functional distinction drawn for a particular purpose.⁵³ Indeed, he thinks of this distinction as a hangover of a primitive state of society in which slaves did the instrumentally necessary work while a leisured class pursued the good for its own sake. So we shouldn't accept a dichotomy between thinking of democracy as good in itself (because it expresses equal respect or allows for the equal contribution of all, as in his democratic ideal [iv]) or as good only for its effects (because it allows for or fosters better epistemic outcomes, for example). The distinction makes sense when identifying and solving problems; that is, from the perspective of particular agents working out what is going on and what to do (if your bicycle breaks you have a problem that needs solving about the instrumental means of achieving the end of getting to work this morning). But the standard of success here is always contextual, as we've seen: it solves the problem that is confronted. And our ends (e.g., the value of your being at work) are open to critical appraisal, in part in the light of what we know about the means needed to achieve them. The radical openness of inquiry, spanning means and ends, is set up to avoid the instrumentalism objection.

Taken in isolation, what I've called Dewey's pragmatic self-contradiction argument [i] seems vulnerable to this concern: in that argument, participation is understood as a means of providing epistemic access to popular interests. So we may think that in principle there could be some alternative way of finding out what those interests are, a possibility which summons up the worry expressed by Urbinati and others. But, as we've seen, that is only one argument, and a slightly atypical one in its content and scope for Dewey – directed at showing the residual benefits of democratic “political machinery” for keeping technocrats in line. It is misleading to look at this in isolation as it should be seen as embedded in the wider

⁵³ E.g., John Dewey, *Theory of Valuation*, in *Later Works*, vol. 13, ed. Boydston, p. 215.

context of [ii]-[iv]. Dewey wants to show how any move to a knowledge hierarchy is self-subverting [ii], that aspirations to inquiry contain a constitutive democratic element in his sense [iii], and that self-government on democratic terms requires epistemic inclusion.

The other objection to epistemic democracy that I want to consider is that it depoliticizes democracy. From this perspective, to view democracy as a form of social inquiry or a collective effort intelligently to address social problems glosses over democratic politics as a site of power, contention, resistance and conflicting interests and identities. This, as we've seen, is also a well-established line of criticism of Deweyan democracy.

Now for Dewey existing democratic societies are not communities of inquiry. Democratic politics is not pictured as eliminating conflict but as a space in which conflicts can be discussed and resolved: "Of course, there *are* conflicting interests; otherwise there would be no social problems [...] The method of democracy – inasfar as it is that of organized intelligence – is to bring these conflicts out into the open where their special claims can be seen and appraised, where they can be discussed and judged in the light of more inclusive interests than are represented by either of them separately".⁵⁴ This is not a given state of affairs but one that needs to be continually fought for in the face of opposition: "the struggle for democracy has to be maintained on as many fronts as culture has aspects: political, economic, international, educational, scientific, and artistic, religious".⁵⁵ Furthermore, as noted above, a number of commentators have drawn attention to Dewey's support for more radical forms of democratic participation and action, including his activities

⁵⁴ John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*, in *Later Works*, vol. 11, p. 56 (emphasis in original). See Melvin Rogers, "Democracy, Elites and Power: John Dewey Reconsidered", *Contemporary Political Theory*, 8 (2009): 68-89; R. W. Hildreth, "Reconstructing Dewey on Power", *Political Theory*, 37 (2009): 780-807.

⁵⁵ Dewey, "Creative Democracy", p. 186.

on behalf of groups such as the League for Industrial Democracy.⁵⁶ “To form itself”, he writes, “the public has to break existing political forms. This is hard to do because these forms are themselves the regular means of instituting political change”.⁵⁷ This more contentious streak in his political thinking includes his support for industrial democracy, for industrial action (including notably the 1894 Pullman workers’ strike in Chicago), activities to develop more radical alternative political parties.⁵⁸ In opposition to the struggle for democracy powerful groups are ruthless in their efforts to rig the political agenda and to control thought and speech.⁵⁹ Although better than authoritarian alternatives, “discussion and dialectic” are “weak reeds” to rely on “if the problem of social organization is to be met”.⁶⁰ Stears, Jackson, and Livingston each quote this last passage, arguing that there is a tension between this dimension of Dewey’s thinking and the interpretation of Dewey as a proponent of social inquiry.

Rounding out our picture of Dewey’s conception of politics in this way doesn’t in itself address the objection to an epistemic view of democracy, of course, but only pushes the

⁵⁶ Stears, *Demanding Democracy*; Jackson, “Dividing Deliberative and Participatory Democracy”; Medearis, *Why Democracy is Oppositional*; Livingston, “Means and Ends”.

⁵⁷ Dewey, *Public*, p. 255.

⁵⁸ Westbrook, *Democratic Hope*, pp. 74-98; Livingston, “Means and Ends”. I’d like to thank William Caspary and Scott Pratt for helpful discussion of these points.

⁵⁹ “Direct and violent encroachments on liberty of thought and speech are perpetrated by politics and by organized bands of persons when suggestions for important social change in economic lines are put forth. A still greater invasion of freedom of thought comes about by subtler and more insidious means. Just because public opinion and sentiment are so powerful in a democratic country, even when its democracy is largely nominal, it is immensely worth while for any group which wishes to control public action to regulate their formation. This is best done at their source – while, that is, they are still in the process of forming. Propaganda is the method used” (Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, p. 360).

⁶⁰ Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*, p. 50.

problem back. In particular, we may think, don't these two pictures suggest different requirements for political actors? A full answer to this would require a more detailed exploration both of the various ways in which the character of the political is defined in order to support this criticism (agonist, realist, pluralist, and so on) and, of course, an investigation into the various ways in which politics is envisaged across Dewey's extensive and varied corpus: his sympathies change, he writes for different audiences in different genres at different times, some of his political activities and commitments are "incompletely theorized".⁶¹

Here I want to explore one important systematic way of identifying and addressing this apparent dissonance, for the light it sheds on Dewey's account. Let's start by considering Marc Stears's argument that we can reconcile these two views of democratic politics through distinguishing non-ideal and ideal theory – between what's required as a tactical and political matter to achieve the conditions for social inquiry and a moral ideal of social and political inquiry in ideal conditions. Dewey "separated the long-term goal of a communicative democracy – to which he remained resolutely committed – from a short-term political strategy suitable for a Depression-era America that emphasized a series of distinctly non-deliberative approaches to the ongoing struggle". At a non-ideal level, democrats should be concerned with establishing the conditions for a well-functioning democracy: but this may involve "adversarial, manipulative, and even coercive" action.⁶²

⁶¹ It's notable that some critics of Dewey, including very sophisticated ones, still put some of his earliest, organicist work alongside later texts without distinguishing the important changes in philosophical context: e.g., Talisse, "Farewell".

⁶² Stears, *Demanding Democracy*, pp. 95, 12. See also Livingston, "Means and Ends", p. 523: "coercive means can serve democratic ends when they are used to *provoke* rather than *resolve* democratic inquiry in the face of habits, ideologies, and institutions obstructing the public's inquiry into its problems".

As we've seen in relation to argument [iv] above, while Dewey's relationship to the ideal/non-ideal distinction (itself multifaceted) is complex, there is an important space for the ideals in Dewey's theory.⁶³ However, Dewey's epistemic arguments aren't presented as blueprints of ideal epistemic conditions but as tools for identifying sources of epistemic failure in actual conditions. The first three epistemic arguments aim to provide critical leverage on non-ideal conditions – at technocratic claims [i], knowledge hierarchies [ii], and epistemic exclusion [iii]. In the case of [iv], the democratic ideal is also proposed as a critical tool for application in non-ideal circumstances. How we use these standards, including working out how they sit alongside our other needs and values, is the problem for us as agents in a precarious environment, acting on and shaping ourselves within uncertain conditions, with no guarantee of a successful outcome. From this perspective, there is no prospect of a general theoretical reconciliation of politics as conflict and as inquiry as types, only the practical project of identifying and solving problems. It seems a mistake, then, to align ideal theory (in this sense) with a blueprint for ideal circumstances, when it seems to be intended as a tool for critical engagement in non-ideal actuality.

Further, Dewey also suggests that these epistemic commitments offer a counterweight to forces that erode or eliminate politics. Of course, politics can lapse into “[d]ogmatism, reinforced by the weight of unquestioned custom and tradition, the disguised or open play of class interests, dependence on brute force and violence”, as he writes in response to Reinhold Niebuhr.⁶⁴ However, experimentalism provides an alternative:

There is an undoubted objective clash of interests between finance-capitalism that controls the means of production and whose profit is served by maintaining relative

⁶³ Festenstein, “Ideal and Actual”; Matthew Festenstein, “Pragmatism, Realism and Moralism”, *Political Studies Review*, 14 (2016): 39-49.

⁶⁴ John Dewey, “Intelligence and Power”, in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 9, ed. by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), p. 108.

scarcity, and idle workers and hungry consumers. But what generates violent strife is failure to bring the conflict into the light of intelligence where the conflicting interests can be adjudicated in behalf of the interest of the great majority. Those most committed to the dogma of inevitable force recognize the need for discovering and expressing the dominant social interest up to a certain point and then draw back. The “experimentalist” is one who would see to it that the method depended upon by all in some degree in every democratic community be followed through to completion.⁶⁵

The contribution of experimentalism is epistemic, the discovery and expression of the dominant social interest, but doesn’t in itself resolve the clash of interests. This end-in-view, though, is a means to a further end, keeping politics political, as it were – it stops politics sliding into mere violence or coercion. Of course, there are no guarantees of success in this, nor is it the case that violence and coercion can always be avoided. But it’s important that Dewey sees experimentalism as a bulwark against the collapse of political relationships into authoritarianism, dogma and violence.

IV. Conclusions

In the light of recent debates, I’ve argued that a systematic epistemic account of democracy can be reconstructed from Dewey’s writings, with a distinctive nested structure. Further, I’ve sketched how this can defuse at least some important forms of the broader charges of instrumentalism and depoliticization that are directed at the epistemic project. This account operates at a very abstract level, in spite of Dewey’s regular engagement in specific polemics: it is developed in relation to both his very distinctive and idiosyncratic view of democracy as a necessarily unfinished and radically open social project of breaking old forms and making new ones, of the contextual character of value, and of human inquiry as form of agency. This

⁶⁵ Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*, p. 56.

last point is worth emphasizing, as it suggests we should be cautious about trying to extract “lessons from Dewey” to address contemporary theoretical problems, while glossing over the wider commitments that support his position. The genealogy of epistemic democracy may be stranger – or at least less familiar – as well as richer, than its contemporary proponents and detractors maintain.

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